GQ

THE 2024 MEN OF THE YEAR ISSUE

STARRING

ENTERTAINER OF THE YEAR

DWAYNE JOHNSON

WITH

JOHN MULANEY

PHARRELL WILLIAMS

FUTURE & METRO BOOMIN

AND

JOHN DAVID & MALCOLM WASHINGTON

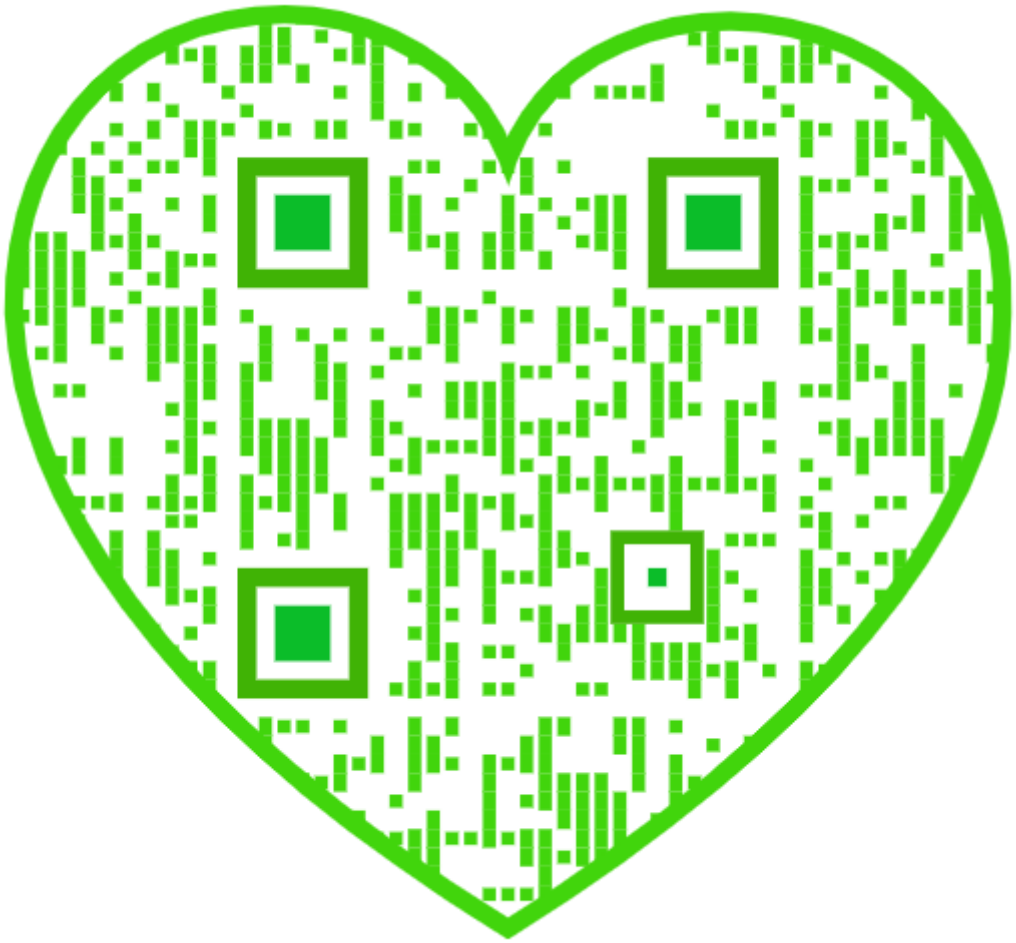
KATT WILLIAMS

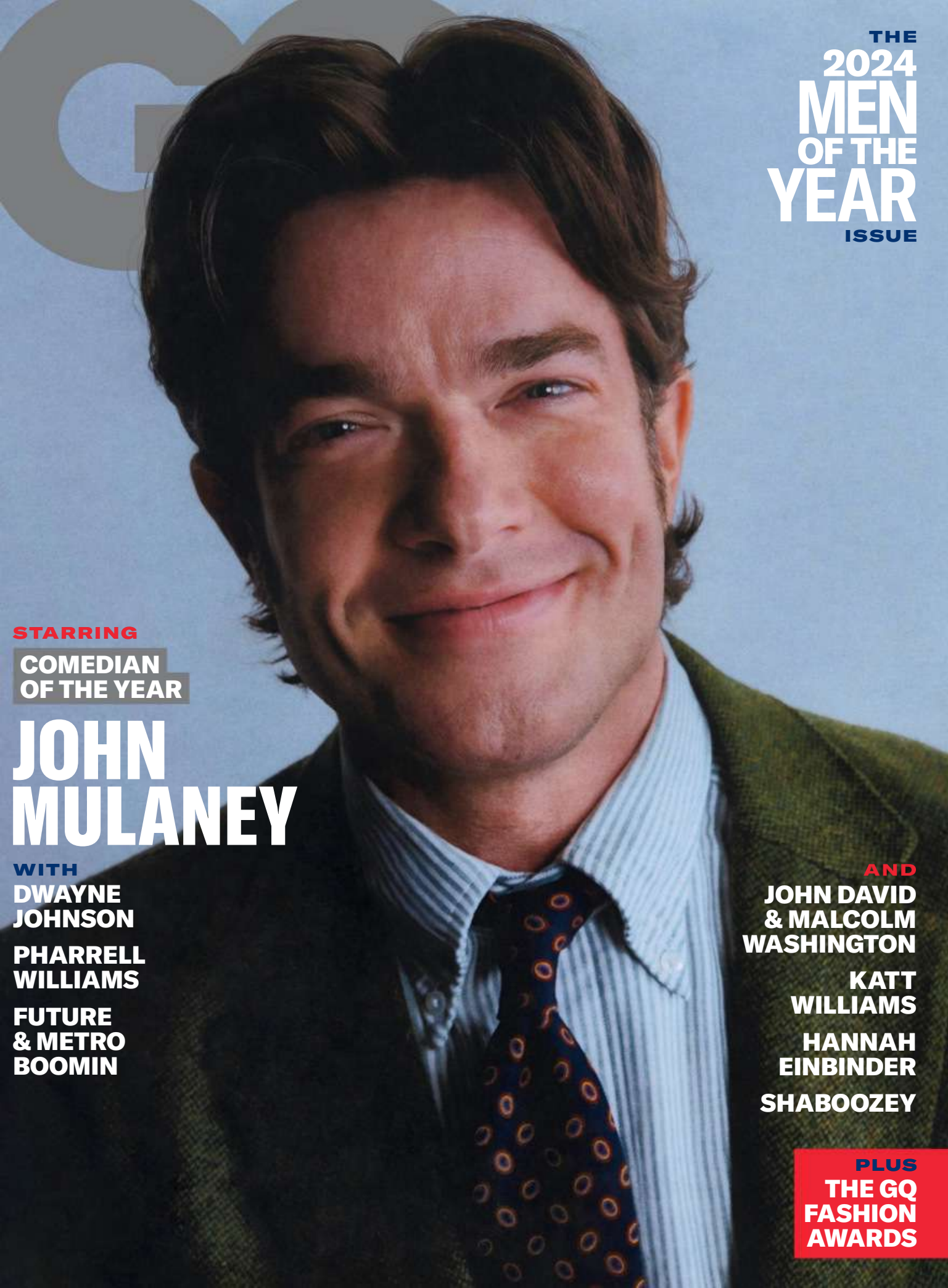
HANNAH EINBINDER

SHABOOZEY

PLUS

THE GQ FASHION AWARDS





THE 2024 MEN OF THE YEAR ISSUE

STARRING

COMEDIAN OF THE YEAR

JOHN MULANEY

WITH

DWAYNE JOHNSON

PHARRELL WILLIAMS

FUTURE & METRO BOOMIN

AND

JOHN DAVID & MALCOLM WASHINGTON

KATT WILLIAMS

HANNAH EINBINDER

SHABOOZEY

PLUS

THE GQ FASHION AWARDS

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WITH
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& MALCOLM
WASHINGTON
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WILLIAMS
HANNAH
EINBINDER
SHABOOZEY
PLUS
THE GQ
FASHION
AWARDS

THE 2024 MEN OF THE YEAR ISSUE

STARRING

HITMAKERS OF THE YEAR

FUTURE & METRO BOOMIN

WITH

DWAYNE JOHNSON

JOHN MULANEY

PHARRELL WILLIAMS

PLUS

THE GQ FASHION AWARDS

AND

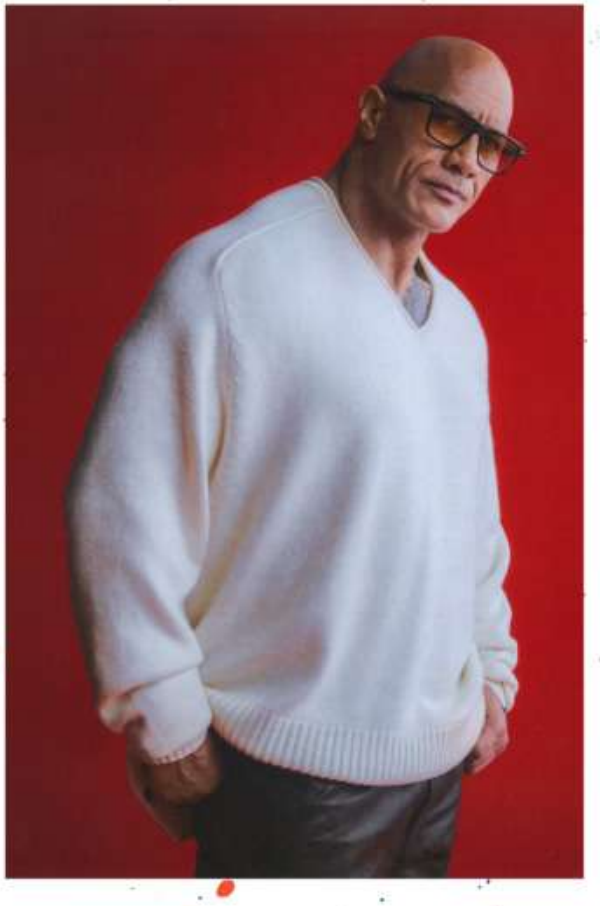
JOHN DAVID & MALCOLM WASHINGTON

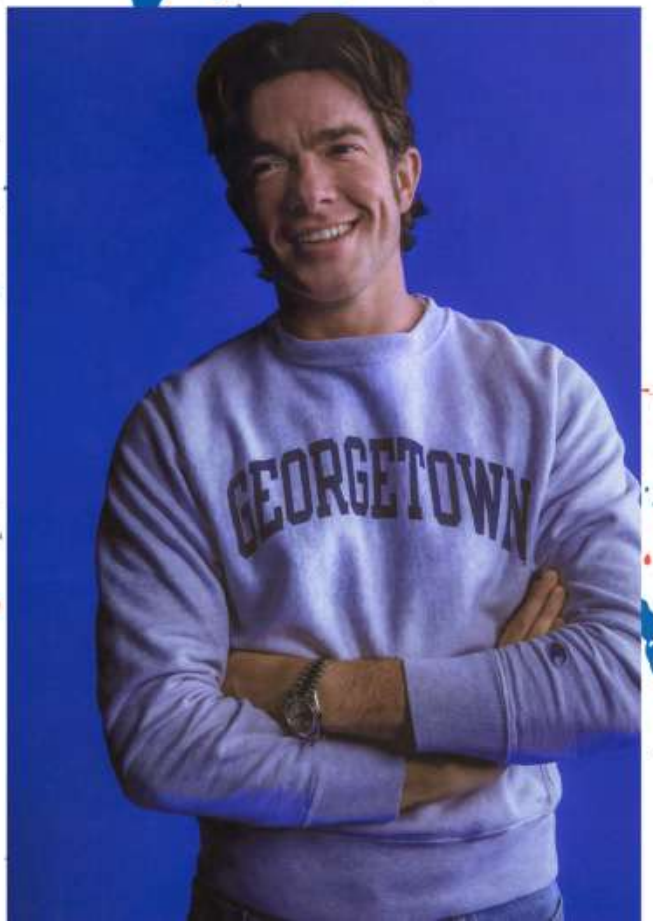
KATT WILLIAMS

HANNAH EINBINDER

SHABOOZEY

MOT





METRO BOOMIN AND FUTURE: STYLIST, MOBOLAJI DAWODU. DWAYNE JOHNSON: STYLIST, HEIDI BIVENS. JOHN MULANEY: STYLIST, JON TIETZ. PHARRELL WILLIAMS: STYLIST, MATTHEW HENSON AND ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ. ON JOHNSON: SWEATER BY EXTREME CASHMERE; PANTS BY BALENCIAGA; HIS OWN SUNGLASSES BY TOM FORD. ON WILLIAMS: QUILT BY ERL. SEE ADDITIONAL CREDITS, PAGES 99, 104, AND 113.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ**

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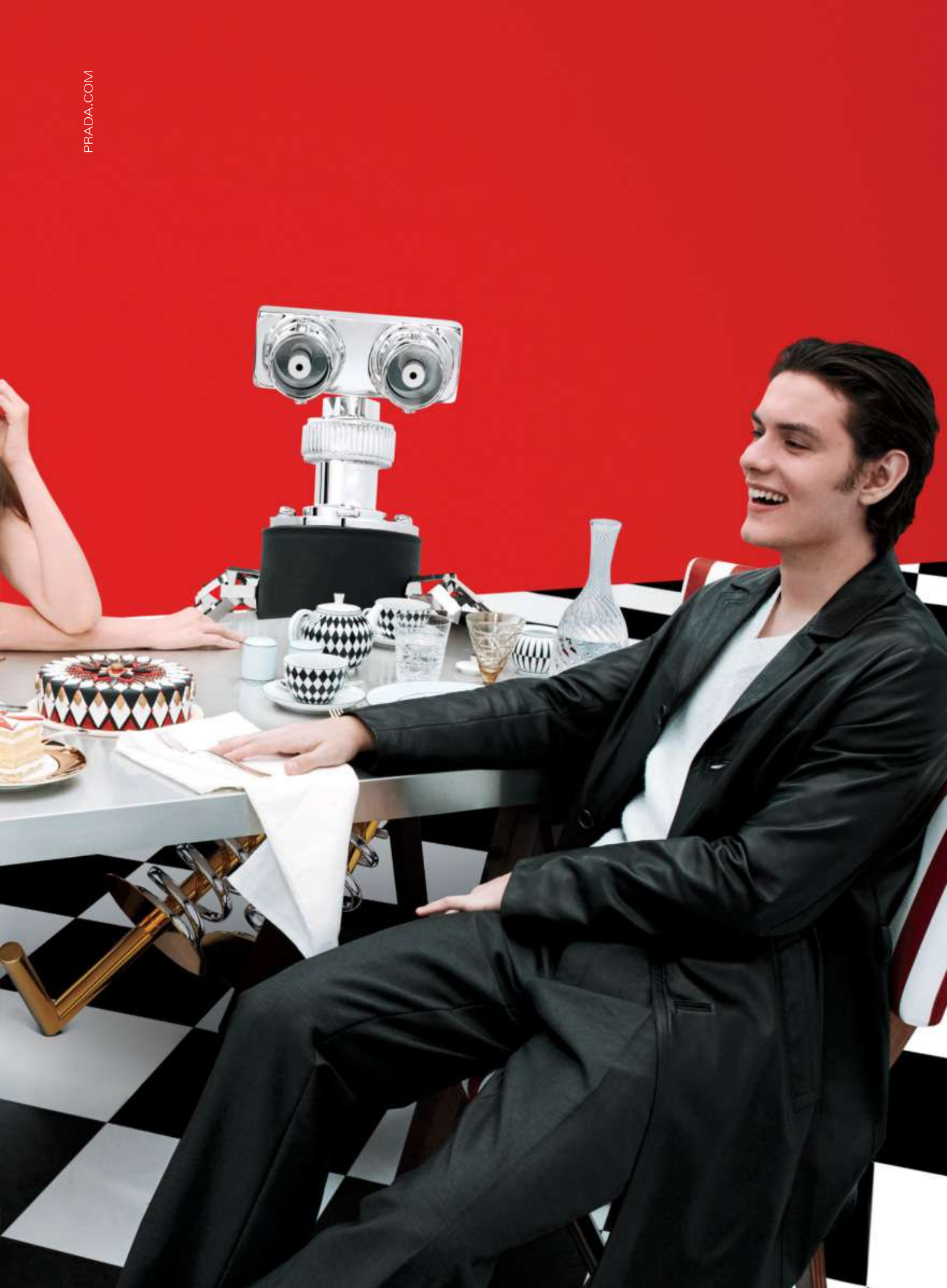

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Performance.

MONCLER

12
BVLGARI
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SWISS MADE

BVLGARI

ROMA 1884

GQ MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

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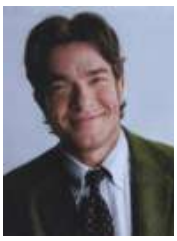
Contributor

ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ Designer, ERL

Eli Russell Linnetz didn't realize how seriously we wanted him to photograph all four 2024 MOTY covers until the final shoot with Future and Metro Boomin in Miami, as Hurricane Milton was bearing down. To build a fluid narrative, Linnetz considered what he learned about storytelling at USC film school. "We wanted to make sure a different aspect of the American male was communicated in each one of these shoots," he explained.

On the Covers

Styled by Heidi Bivens at Honey Artists. T-shirt by **Velva Sheen.** Jeans by **Levi's.** Belt by **John Varvatos.** Handkerchief, stylist's own. His own necklace (worn as bracelet) by **Jacquie Aiche.**



Styled by Jon Tietz. Blazer and tie by **J.Crew.** Shirt by **Drake's.**

Styled by Matthew Henson and Eli Russell Linnetz. Jacket and hat by **Vintage on Hollywood from ERL Vintage Archive.** Tank top by **ERL.** His own jeans, and bag, by **Louis Vuitton Men's.** Belt from **ERL Vintage Archive.**

Styled by Mobolaji Dawodu. **On METRO BOOMIN:** Suit and shirt by **Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.** Bolo tie by **Clint Orms Engravers & Silversmiths.** Bandana, stylist's own. Ring by **David Yurman. On FUTURE:** Suit and shirt by **Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello.** Bolo tie by **Chrome Hearts.** Hat by **Stetson.** Sunglasses by **Ahlem.** Watch by **Omega.** Ring (on right pinkie) by **John Hardy.**

ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ: ALEX LOCKETT. ON PHARRELL WILLIAMS: SUNGLASSES AND JEWELRY. HIS OWN. ON METRO BOOMIN: EARRINGS. HIS OWN. ON FUTURE: EARRING, NOSE RING, BRACELET, AND RING (ON LEFT HAND). HIS OWN.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ

DOLCE & GABBANA

GQ MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

For our cover story on Dwayne Johnson, our Entertainer of the Year, see page 82.

T-shirt by **Velva Sheen.** Jeans by **Levi's.** Belt by **John Varvatos.** Handkerchief, stylist's own.
His own necklace (worn as bracelet) by **Jacquie Aiche.**

STYLIST, HEIDI BIVENS.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ**

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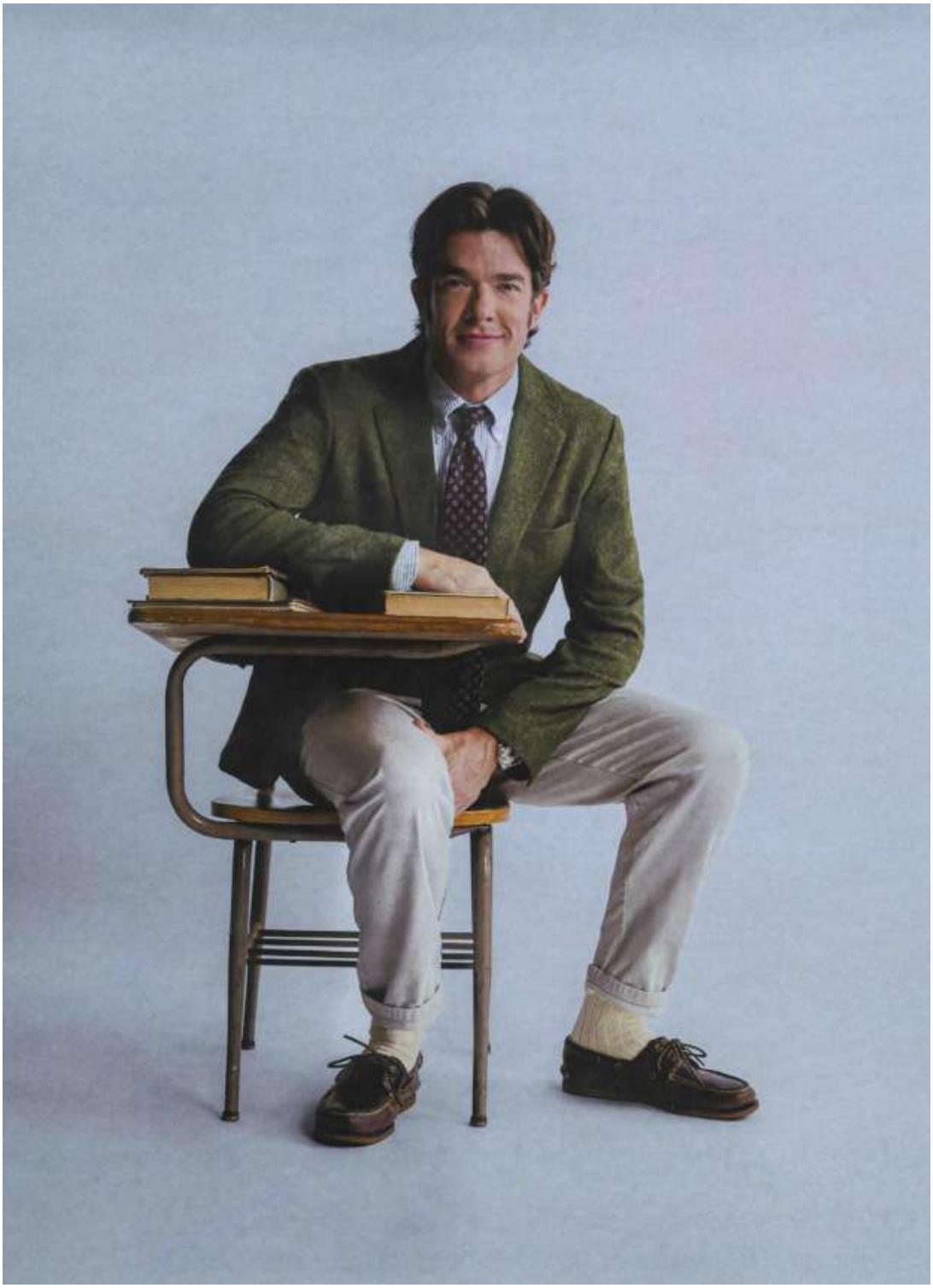

For our cover story on John Mulaney, our Comedian of the Year, see page 92.

Jacket, tie, and socks by **J.Crew.** Shirt by **Drake's.** Vintage pants by **Banana Republic.** Vintage shoes by **Timberland from the Society Archive.** Watch by **Rolex.**

STYLIST, JON TIETZ.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ**

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GQ MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

For our cover story on Pharrell Williams, our Designer of the Year, see page 102.

Jacket, turtleneck, and pants by **Maison Margiela.** Sunglasses by **Ahlem.** Pin from **ERL Vintage Archive.** Bracelet by **Tiffany & Co.** Grills and ring, his own.

STYLISTS, MATTHEW HENSON AND ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ**

VERSACE

EROS ENERGY

VERSACE

BLOOMINGDALE'S DILLARD'S MACY'S NORDSTROM

GQ REPORT

EVENTS
PROMOTIONS
EXCLUSIVES

Glenfiddich Gran Reserva 21 Year Old—A Gift for Blossoming Futures*

Glenfiddich Single Malt Scotch Whisky partners with internationally acclaimed artist Raku Inoue to unveil a new limited-edition pack for Gran Reserva 21 Year Old. The colorful design symbolizing 'hope in the promise of new futures soon to bloom' complements the aged whisky finished in Caribbean rum-soaked casks. Sweet vanilla, banana, and rich toffee notes make this whisky perfect for celebrating special occasions.

glenfiddich.com/en-us

*Skilfully Crafted, Enjoy Responsibly. Glenfiddich Single Malt Scotch Whisky, 40% ABV ©2024 Imported by William Grant & Sons, Inc. New York, NY

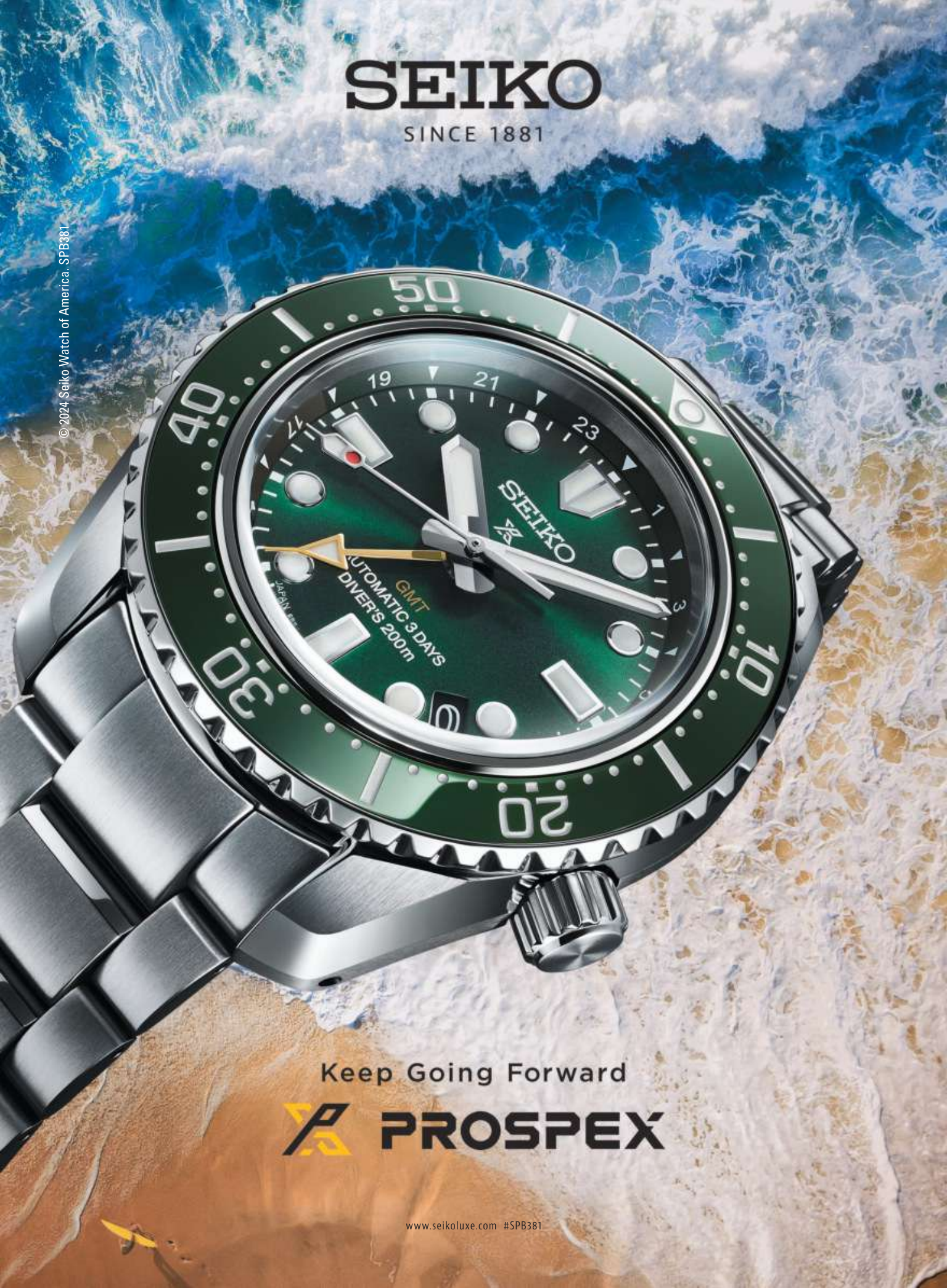
GQ MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

For our cover story on Metro Boomin and Future, our Hitmakers of the Year, see page 112.

On METRO BOOMIN: Jacket by **Dior Men.** Shirt by **Dzojchen.** Hat by **Stetson.** Bolo tie by **Clint Orms Engravers & Silversmiths.** Earring, his own. **On FUTURE:** Jacket and pants by **Dior Men.** Hat by **Stetson.** Scarf by **Charvet.** Sunglasses by **Jacques Marie Mage.** Watch by **Jaeger-LeCoultre.** Nose rings and ring, his own.

STYLIST, MOBOLAJI DAWODU.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **ELI RUSSELL LINNETZ**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My Main Man of the Year

FROM HIS TRAD style to his abiding interest in the American West, nobody was more on point in 2024 (even if he doesn't know it) than my dad, Bill Welch. So on the occasion of *GQ*'s 29th Men of the Year issue, I called him up at home in St. Simons Island, Georgia—where he grew up and now lives with my mom, Sherie—and asked him to reflect on his year.

How would you describe your year in 2024? I am extremely happy with my retired life and a 56-year marriage, and I am conflicted politically to the point that it is a problem. But other than that, extremely content at age 79.

How loud is the political moment in your life? It's more than loud, Will. The vitriol that's being spewed is awful. I just came back from a trip with 13 people, old friends since we were college age, and we had some serious disagreements on things and it was pretty unpleasant.

We'll come back to politics. How would you describe your sense of style? Stuck in the past.

Say more about that. I went to high school at Glynn Academy in Brunswick, Georgia. And for some reason, style, even with the men, was a big deal. The right shirts, the right shoes, the right look. And I took that to Boston College, and there, style was also important for the guys I hung around with. Jacket and tie was required for every class, so we always had a jacket and tie and we felt like we were pretty cool. I never really changed much.

And what do you think about the modern fashion that you see in the world and in *GQ*? One thing I noticed, Will, is that young men will not be very well turned out day-to-day. They're very, very casual. But the interesting thing I find is that, when I then see these guys later that night, at a place where you dress a certain way, they turn out beautifully. They transition from daytime, where it's so casual, to night, and they do extremely well.

You and Mom have been married for over 50 years. What is the key to longevity? It's trite, but there's a lot of compromise. It requires a lot of self-reflecting on your own shortcomings. I have a big list, and it's hard, but that's it. You look at your own shortcomings and you try.

You're a romantic. What role does that play in your marriage? Well, a lot of men that I know, I don't sense they're having a little morning kiss or suggesting Champagne if their wife likes Champagne. They just kind of rock along. I do more than that. You know how I am. I'm touchy-feely. I'm not trying to say I know everything, but I do know how women feel about romance. If men will give women a little bit of the right kind of romance, it will go a long way.

You have been a collector of artifacts from the American West for four decades. What captured your imagination? Growing up here on a small island of 2,000, we had a theater that had Saturday movies like every town did back in the '50s. And they always showed these cowboy shorts, and a lot of the movies would be Westerns. It stuck. The whole idea of the Colt Single Action revolver, riding horses, and trying to bring the bad man to justice. I collected coins as a second grader, then baseball cards, and then antique Western artifacts. It caught me early and hard.

And how would you describe the role this hobby of yours has played in your life? Huge. I've spent 20 hours a week on it for 40 years. There are about 400 of us nationally that are into this stuff. We meet at antique-gun shows around the country. So I have really good friends that do what I do and we're on the phone all the time, buying, selling, and trading. This hobby has been huge in my life in terms of day-to-day satisfaction.

What is your wish for 2025? Let's start with politics. The whole country desperately needs a calming. A bipartisan thinking as opposed to the Trumpian bashing and lying. I'm very hopeful of that. On the international front, I'm not naive enough to think that we're ever going to have peace. It's extremely sad when you read history and realize there has almost never been peace. But still, I'm hopeful for a better record on peace in 2025.

And what about on the personal front? Your mom and I travel every night by YouTube. We just search "travel Sri Lanka" or the name of any country or city and four different shows pop up. We're not getting on airplanes, going to Europe. But we go via YouTube. And we have so many good plans in the making already for next year, including your mom's 80th birthday.

Thank you, Dad. Call your mom.

Will Welch
GLOBAL EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Me and Dad on the steps outside church in Atlanta, circa 1989.

COURTESY OF WILL WELCH.

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GQ World

Drops

BIG-TIME TAILORING
When it comes to ringing in the holidays, there's still no topping a swaggering, celebratory tuxedo—especially one as powerful in the shoulders and lapels as this **Prada** rig.

On HUNTER: Jacket and pants by **Prada.** Shirt by **Gucci.** Boots by **R.M. Williams.** Sunglasses by **Jacques Marie Mage.** Bracelet, his own. Ring by **Cartier.**
On TARA: Dress by **Prada.** Shoes by **Roger Vivier.** Earrings and bracelet by **Shay.** Ring (on left hand), her own. Ring (on right hand) by **David Yurman.**

The Ultimate GQ Holiday Wish List

STARRING PARALYMPIC & OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALISTS
HUNTER WOODHALL & TARA DAVIS-WOODHALL

Here's what 30 serious tastemakers—from athletes and designers to musicians and GQ staffers—are hoping to unwrap this year.

By MATTHEW ROBERSON and YANG-YI GOH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ASHLEY OLAH**
STYLED BY **HALEY GILBREATH**

HUNTER WOODHALL: GROOMING, MR. SARAH AT THE WALL GROUP. TARA DAVIS-WOODHALL: HAIR, AREIAL TAYLOR; MAKEUP, TASHA REIKO BROWN USING CHANEL. TAILORING, YELENA TRAVKINA. LIGHTING DESIGN, MAX GRAY WILBUR. PRODUCED BY DANIELLE GRUBERGER AT SEDUKO PRODUCTIONS.

GQ World Drops

SAINT LAURENT TUXEDO
"Buy me Anthony Vaccarello's rippling riff on Saint Laurent's house-specialty tuxedo," says *GQ* senior commerce editor **Avidan Grossman**, "and I promise to show up to your holiday party—and pretend I'm excited to be there." Sounds like a deal to us (jacket, $3,690, pants, $1,850).

VINTAGE CARTIER TANK
Thom Browne is the king of uniform dressing and, as far as he's concerned, his trademark gray suits only feel "complete with a simple vintage Cartier watch" ($10,200).

MADRE ESPADIN Y CUISHE MEZCAL
As the DJ and musician at the heart of New York's indie-sleaze revival, **The Dare** picks up a bottle of this sweet and smoky mezcal whenever he's in need of a last-minute present. "Literally can't lose with this gift," he says ($20 for 200 ml).

THE MARATHON CLOTHING CRENSHAW HOODIE
Tennis ace **Frances Tiafoe**'s favorite rapper? "I'm a huge Nipsey Hussle fan," he says. To celebrate the late West Coast legend, Tiafoe has been rocking this hoodie from his LA streetwear label ($200).

COMMISSION MIDTOWN TOTE
GQ visuals editor **Bowen Fernie** says this enormous, painterly leather tote is perfect "for people like me, who like to carry around a little too much stuff at all times" ($1,425).

THE ROW BRUNO SWEATER
"This is the cozy sweater of the season," declares **Anthony O'Baner Jr.**, *GQ*'s executive assistant to the global editorial director, of this toasty cashmere layer. "Seriously, it's the only one I'm after" ($3,490).

RIMOWA ORIGINAL OPTICAL CABIN
Rimowa's hard-wearing luggage "will take you anywhere in style," says *GQ* global fashion director **Miles Pope**, especially this trippy new spin with off-kilter aluminum ribbing ($2,050).

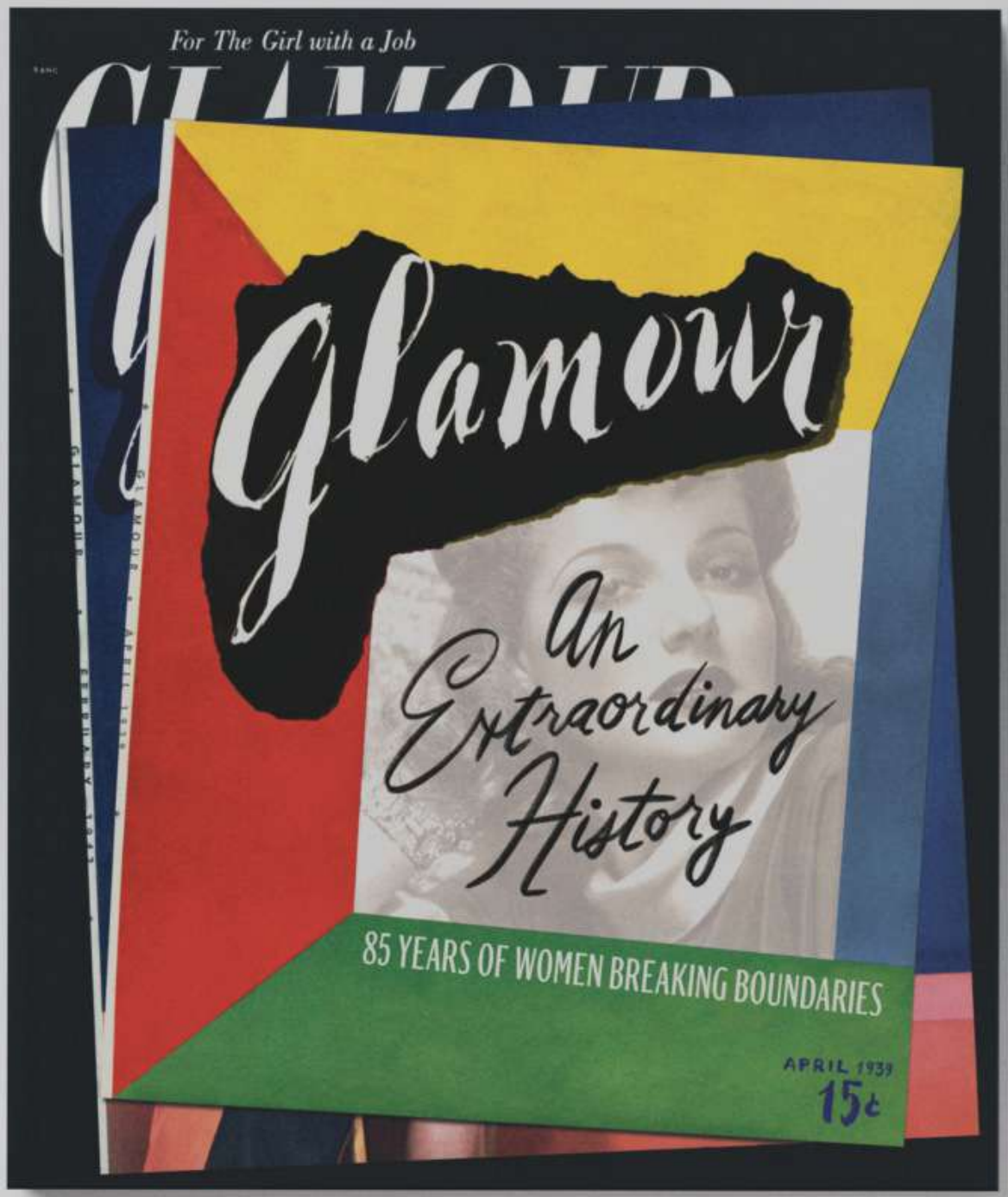
STETSON EL PRESIDENTE COWBOY HAT
Country renegade **Orville Peck** knows his way around a good cowboy hat. Crafted from fine fur felt with a 10-karat gold buckle set, this stone-cold classic Stetson is his "all-time favorite" ($1,450).

ALLIGATOR JESUS DIAMOND GRILLZ
"Diamonds are a girl's best friend," South African pop star **Tyla** reminds us. Especially when they're splashed across a righteous set of custom grills ($37,800).

LOEWE TERRA VULCA LACE-UP SNEAKERS IN SUEDE
GQ global design director **Keir Novesky** is generally more of a Converse guy, he says, but "these lilac Loewe kicks might make me change my tune" ($790).

TYLA: ALVARO BEAMUD CORTES/COURTESY OF EPIC RECORDS. ORVILLE PECK: BEN PRINCE/COURTESY OF WARNER RECORDS. THOM BROWNE: BLAINE DAVIS/COURTESY OF THOM BROWNE. THE DARE: RICHARD KERN/COURTESY OF THE DARE. FRANCES TIAFOE: ELSA GARRISON/COURTESY OF FRANCES TIAFOE. ALL OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

A *STUNNING* look back at *Glamour*'s *MOST ICONIC* covers, photos & stories



ON SALE NOW WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

GQ World Drops

Golden Couple

Tara Davis-Woodhall & Hunter Woodhall

LIKE MANY LUCKY couples, Tara Davis-Woodhall and Hunter Woodhall went to Paris this summer. Theirs, however, was a business trip: They're athletes who were competing in the 2024 Olympics and Paralympics, respectively. In August, Tara won Olympic gold in the long jump. Hunter, a Paralympic sprinter, cheered her on wearing his "Team Tara" T-shirt; his weepy enthusiasm delivered one of the Games' signature viral moments.

The next month Tara watched Hunter mount a comeback victory in his 400-meter T62 race. Then husband and wife headed home, their lives forever changed.

Technically they live in Kansas, but there are appearances to make, hands to shake—Hunter lights up when talking about meeting Apple CEO Tim Cook—and opportunities to capitalize on. "Every day's a fairy tale," Tara says. "Are you kidding me?"

In obvious ways their story is unique: They are an interracial couple where one person is nondisabled and the other is a double amputee. (Her family's response to meeting Hunter for the first time, Tara says, was: "Leave it to you to bring home a white boy with no legs.") But theirs is also a classic Gen Z coupling. In 2017 they launched a shared YouTube channel, and they maintain both individual and joint TikTok accounts.

This is not because they're dying to be famous, but because the Olympics occur only every four years and their disciplines aren't exactly the moneymaking ones. "For a long jumper and a Paralympian, there's no money," Hunter says. "Teacher salaries," Tara adds. A gold medal earns an athlete a $37,500 bonus from the USA's Olympic governing body, and $50,000 from the World Athletic Olympic Committee. But because Hunter's a Paralympian, he explains, he missed out on the $50K.

Hence the whirlwind schedule, the slate of brand deals, the massive social media presence. "We'll have fans on social media say, 'Wait, you guys do track? That's crazy,'" Tara says.

Amidst the fairy tale, Tara and Hunter are far from complacent. They're planning to compete in LA in 2028; they'd like to start a family, but they'll wait until after the Games to take advantage of their athletic primes.

They're living the sweet life, and it's a far cry from the track meet in Idaho where they met as high schoolers. "When we were 18 years old, we were like, This sucks. I can't wait until we do this or do that," Tara says. "Girl, we're doing it." —MATTHEW ROBERSON

PODIUM-WORTHY PARKA
Working out on a chilly, wet, mid-December day? Miserable. Working out on a chilly, wet, mid-December day in this knockout **Connor McKnight** technical jacket? Worth every second.

On TARA: Bra by **Lululemon.** Pants by **Wales Bonner.** Sneakers by **Thom Browne.** Ring, her own. **On HUNTER:** Jacket by **Connor McKnight.** Tank top and t-shirt by **Sebastien Ami.** Shorts by **Bode.** His own shoes by **Puma.**

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DAVID YURMAN SCULPTED CABLE FLEX BRACELET
If your fit is in need of a little extra oomph, **Leon Bridges** recommends this showstopping diamond bracelet. "It's simple yet elevates any look," the Grammy winner tells us ($15,500).

MARTINE ROSE REVERSE SPORTS JACKET
"I'm just infatuated with Martine Rose," says **Offset**. This techy, sculptural jacket makes it easy to see why. "It keeps the streetwear feel to it, but it's also super-luxury" ($1,510).

PRADA TOTE
"I've been thinking about this weirdly simple (and simply weird) Prada bag since it first hit the runway in January," **Samuel Hine**, *GQ*'s senior fashion writer, says of this smooth suede tote ($6,900).

TAG HEUER CONNECTED CALIBRE E4 45 MM
On the golf course, **Kwame Onwuachi**—the James Beard–winning chef behind NYC's Tatiana—sports this handsome steel smartwatch for reasons both practical...and not. "It keeps track of your distances," he says, "but you can also digitally change the face to match your outfit" ($1,600).

GUCCI GINGHAM JACKET
Why does *GQ* fashion editor **Brandon Tan** love this jacket so much? "Casual and cool," he states. "Need I say more?" ($3,100).

THE ICE POD PORTABLE ICE BATH
After a big show, there's only one place you'll find **Jelly Roll**: taking a plunge in this road-ready ice bath. "I do one every day, especially on tour," he says. "It's been a life-changing addition to my routine" ($99).

OUD SATIN MOOD BY MAISON FRANCIS KURKDJIAN PARIS
"I love to smell good," says Houston Texans star **Stefon Diggs.** He keeps an all-star roster of scents on his dresser, and this woody fragrance—infused with notes of violet and amber—is a reliable staple ($315 for 2.4 fl. oz.).

PHIPPS FLEECE JACKET
Joel Pavelski, *GQ*'s global director of content strategy, has a challenge for you. "Try to tell me you wouldn't be wearing this fleece every day of Christmas vacation. You can't!" he says ($875).

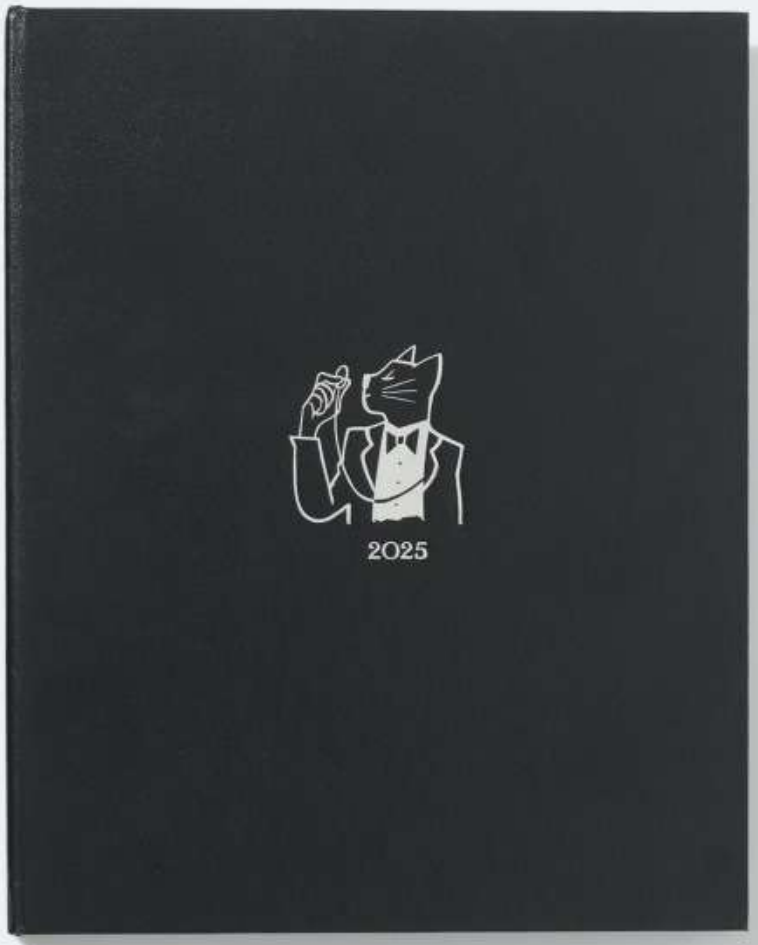
FENDI SIMPLY FENDI MINI LEATHER BAG
GQ global entertainment director **Dana Mathews** has big plans for this purse. "It's a cute statement clutch for our next *GQ* event or an opening night at the theater," she says ($1,850).

NEW BALANCE X MIU MIU 530 MULES
"I've never really been a fashion-sneaker person," admits *GQ* visuals director **Stephanie Tran**. "But a fashion-sneaker *mule*? Size 37, please" ($1,170).

OFFSET: COURTESY OF MOTOWN RECORDS. STEFON DIGGS: KELVIN AYALA/COURTESY OF STEFON DIGGS. JELLY ROLL: ERIC RYAN ANDERSON/COURTESY OF JELLY ROLL. LEON BRIDGES: JACK BOOL/COURTESY OF COLUMBIA RECORDS. KWAME ONWUACHI: STORM SANTOS/COURTESY OF KWAME ONWUACHI. ALL OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

THE NEW YORKER

The 2025 Desk Diary



The best place to map out your year, and to look back at where you went.

Shop all seven colors at newyorker.com/deskdiary

Scan to shop.

GQ World Drops

CHANEL PREMIÈRE SOUND WATCH
If you give *GQ* fashion editor **Haley Gilbreath** a call after the holidays, chances are she'll pick up via these chic wired headphones that "got the full Chanel makeover" ($14,700).

KENZO REVERSIBLE SHEARLING BLOUSON IN LAMBSKIN LEATHER
When the weather takes a turn for the worst this winter, *GQ* global video programming and strategy director **Leo Fernandez** will be sitting pretty in this bold and brawny bomber. "It's the kind of gift that makes you excited for colder days," he says, "just so you can show it off" ($3,930).

CAY SKIN ISLE INVISIBLE SUNSTICK SPF 35
Years of outdoor training have taught Washington Wizards forward **Kyle Kuzma** the importance of protecting his skin. He keeps this roll-on sunscreen handy at all times, he says, to help him "feel confident and fresh" ($20).

***FRANK: THE VOICE* AND *SINATRA: THE CHAIRMAN* BY JAMES KAPLAN**
Got a dad on your list who loves to read? **Jeff Goldblum** has just the thing. "I'm devouring every tidbit in these comprehensively detailed volumes about Mr. Sinatra," he says. "The cool, the brilliantly gifted, the volatile, and complicated" ($25, and, not shown, $20).

WALES BONNER HOWARD CONTRAST TRIM SWEATSHIRT
"No one does academia like Wales Bonner," says **Heven Haile**, *GQ*'s editorial operations assistant. On the evidence of this rakish Howard pullover, we'd tend to agree ($603).

HERMÈS GULLIVER KELLY RETOURNÉ 35
Upon moving back to New York a few years ago, interior designer **Jeremiah Brent** began collecting iconic vintage bags to tote around town. "I don't think there's anything chicer than worn-in leather," he says ($14,100).

DSQUARED2 DENIM BLAZER
According to *GQ* global research director **Mick Rouse**, a Canadian tuxedo still counts as a tuxedo. "If anyone tells you distressed denim can't be formal, just show them this jacket," he says ($2,325).

BYREDO BIBLIOTHÈQUE CANDLES
When Off-White creative director **Ib Kamara** needs to relax, he lights up one of these sumptuous leather-scented candles. "They're the best thing for a quiet night in during the winter," he says ($99).

APPLE IPHONE 16 PRO MAX
For **Ernesto Macias**, *GQ*'s entertainment editor, having the latest iPhone isn't a want—it's a necessity. "My phone is literally an extension of my body," he says. "I'm constantly texting, calling, emailing, posting, liking, commenting, and gossiping. If you get it, you get it" ($1,199).

LEGO TECHNIC McLAREN P1
Texan hitmakers **Grupo Frontera** all "have a passion for cars" and remain "big kids at heart," so it's no surprise this wild Lego supercar hit home for the band ($450).

IB KAMARA: COURTESY OF IB KAMARA. JEREMIAH BRENT: ADRIAN GAUT/COURTESY OF JEREMIAH BRENT. JEFF GOLDBLUM: PASCAL LE SEGRETAIN/GETTY IMAGES. GRUPO FRONTERA: ERIC ROJAS/COURTESY OF GRUPO FRONTERA. KYLE KUZMA: KENNY GIARLA/COURTESY OF KYLE KUZMA. *FRANK: THE VOICE*: VINTAGE BOOKS/COURTESY OF KNOPF. ALL OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE BRANDS.

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GQ World Watches

A Companion for Your Wrist

Audemars Piguet's new release with artist Brian Donnelly, a.k.a. KAWS, brings high-art hype to the world of pop-watch collabs. By CAM WOLF

OVER THE COURSE of the past two years, Brian Donnelly, the artist better known as KAWS, became skilled at avoiding public detection. If a photographer approached him at an event, he'd subtly twist his wrist inward. He couldn't risk giving away the secret project he's been working on since 2022. But in early September some Instagram sleuths zoomed in on his wrist to find the telltale KAWS X's on the face of his Audemars Piguet Royal Oak—the same X's he regularly paints over the eyes of Bart Simpson, SpongeBob, Elmo, and other famous toons. The news was out: A KAWS Royal Oak was on the way. "I was bummed that the watch got out to the public, because I wanted to keep the snow fresh," Donnelly told me during a video call recently.

However, the actual watch Donnelly made in collaboration with Audemars Piguet, which is to be released on November 19, has little in common with the custom one he was caught wearing. The real thing, called the Royal Oak Concept Tourbillon "Companion," features an obsessively crafted miniature re-creation of the artist's Companion figure trapped inside the watch face, palms pressed out against the crystal. Despite having this demented grayscale Mickey Mouse–like figurine inside, the titanium watch is "shockingly light," Donnelly said, and comes with a brand-new movement with a tourbillon true to AP's technical prowess.

While Donnelly has returned again and again to iconic cartoon characters for his work, the roots of this new Royal Oak Concept go back to another fictional universe: Marvel comics. Over the past few years, the watchmaker released a series of timepieces with Black Panther and Spider-Man figures at the center. Those superhero designs showed KAWS that Audemars Piguet could make real his vision. "I thought, If I'm going to do a watch with them, I want to do something that's really in line with the sculptures I do and have it live in a watch space," Donnelly explained. "Seeing the Marvel [watches], immediately I knew there was no question we could go in that direction."

The sculpture inside the case is a shrunken version of the large-scale Companions that Donnelly shows in galleries and museums around the world. "I'm used to working with these massive scales of 20 meters, so to work on something that's sitting [inside a watch that's] just 43 millimeters is really interesting," he said. But whether he's building a three-story-tall sculpture or one fit for a wrist, he's looking for the best materials and partners. "I'm fascinated by watches," Donnelly said. "There's so much that goes in this small, little object; it's a little jewel box." AP isn't enlisting Donnelly only for the wrist-size work—the artist is also installing a large, inflatable Companion on the roof of the manufacturer's headquarters in Le Brassus, Switzerland.

This KAWS collaboration is the natural result of watch fascination transcending the niche world of die-hard enthusiasts. Donnelly sees a similar thing happening in the art world. "I feel like the watch world has gone through a similar growth [to art] where it might have existed in this connoisseur niche," he said, "and now it's opened up to a lot more people." As a consequence, the watch industry has been evolving to welcome new clients. Few do this better than Audemars Piguet, which has collaborated across the pop culture spectrum from Marvel to Travis Scott to the fashion designer Matthew Williams.

Watch enthusiasts often argue that there is no luxury better than a timepiece, because you can take it everywhere. The Ferrari gets left in the garage, and the ski house in Vail sits empty for months at a time. You could buy one of Donnelly's paintings for a few million dollars, but it will be stuck on your wall when you leave for dinner. The KAWS AP, however, will be your companion wherever you go.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KELSEY NIZIOLEK. AUDEMARS PIGUET: COURTESY OF THE BRAND.

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GQ World Style

The Biggest Fits of 2024

TAYLOR RUSSELL & HARRY STYLES

NYC, *March*

For one brief, shining moment, Harry and Taylor were fashion's most promising power couple. Before the global pop sensation and the indie-darling actor parted ways in late spring, they left their mark with a showstopping set of daytime-casual outfits—mostly by The Row and Loewe, though her trench is vintage Armani—worn while descending the steps of a friend's Brooklyn brownstone.

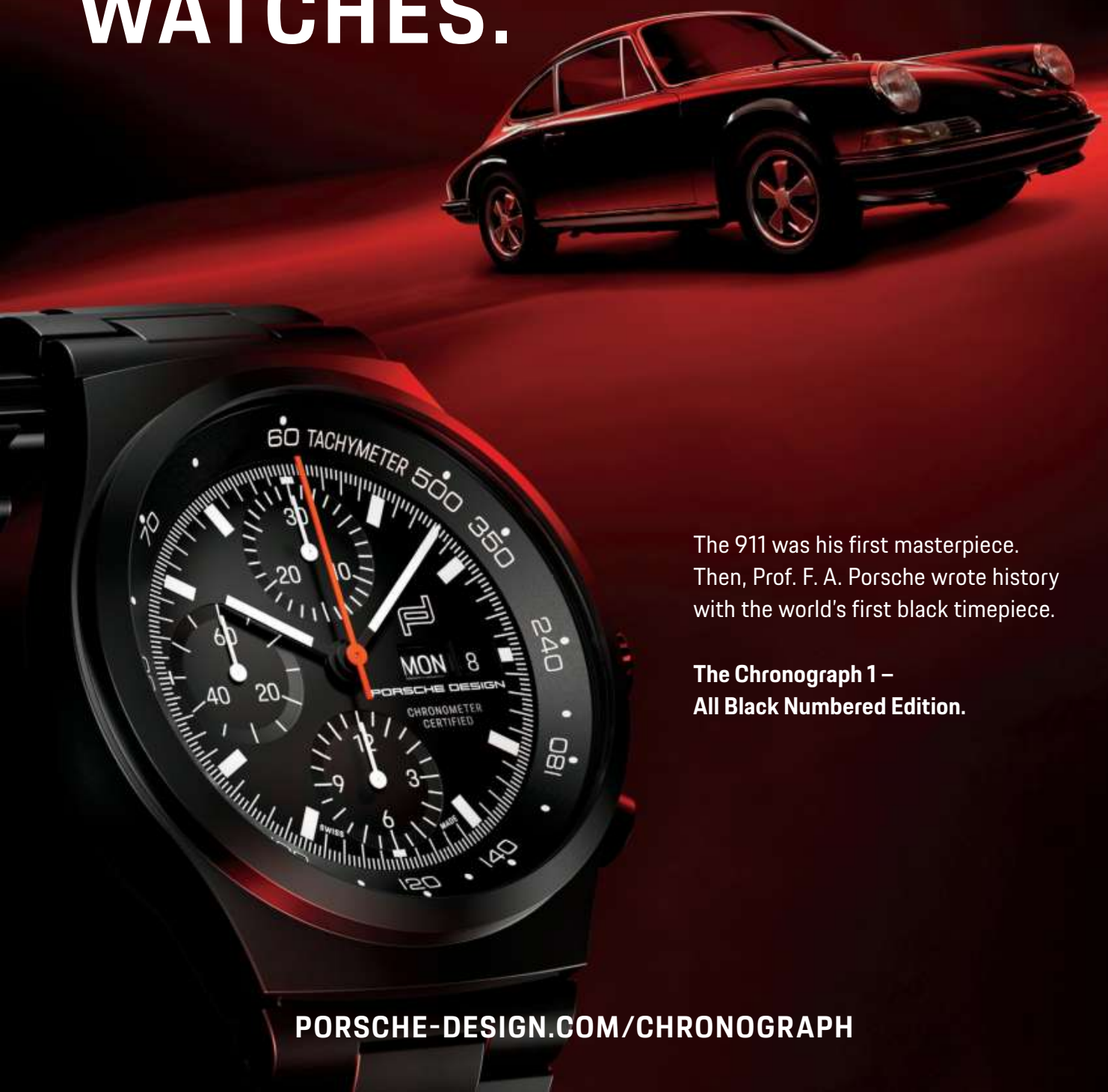
High fashion on a Brooklyn stoop. Cyberpunk steez at the Paris Olympics. Fisherman sandals with a tux on the red carpet. In 2024 our biggest dressers reaffirmed that style inspiration can—and should—strike anywhere.

By EILEEN CARTTER

SPLASHNEWS.COM.

PORSCHE DESIGN

THE 911 AMONG WATCHES.



The 911 was his first masterpiece.
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PORSCHE-DESIGN.COM/CHRONOGRAPH

DANIEL CRAIG

Paris, *September*

What if Bond moved to the Hudson Valley, joined a co-op, and got really into raising chickens? Seems like Craig—who looked serene in a kooky knit sweater and generous cargo pants (plus a faceful of stubble) at Loewe's spring show—is clearly enjoying the post-franchise life. He even rocked a similar fit—including that same stubble—in the label's fall campaign.

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TRACY CHAPMAN

LA, *February*

The crowd lost it when the legendary singer-songwriter appeared on the Grammys stage in a custom Prada shirt for a surprise performance of her generational 1988 hit "Fast Car" alongside country superstar Luke Combs. This era of style is wickedly fun and we wouldn't trade that for the world, but what made Chapman so breathtaking was that she dressed with a spirit that's rare these days: dignity.

Chapman onstage at the 1989 Grammys, singing "Fast Car."

TRACY CHAPMAN, 2024: KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE RECORDING ACADEMY; 1989: CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES.

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Tell your healthcare provider if you have any side effects that bother you or that do not go away after using *neffy*.

These are not all of the possible side effects of ***neffy***. Call your healthcare provider for medical advice about side effects. To report side effects, contact ARS Pharmaceuticals Operations, Inc. at **1-877-MY-NEFFY (877-696-3339)** or the FDA at 1-800-FDA-1088 or www.fda.gov/medwatch.

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FREEDIVER

BASED ON THE GQ ARTICLE BY DANIEL RILEY

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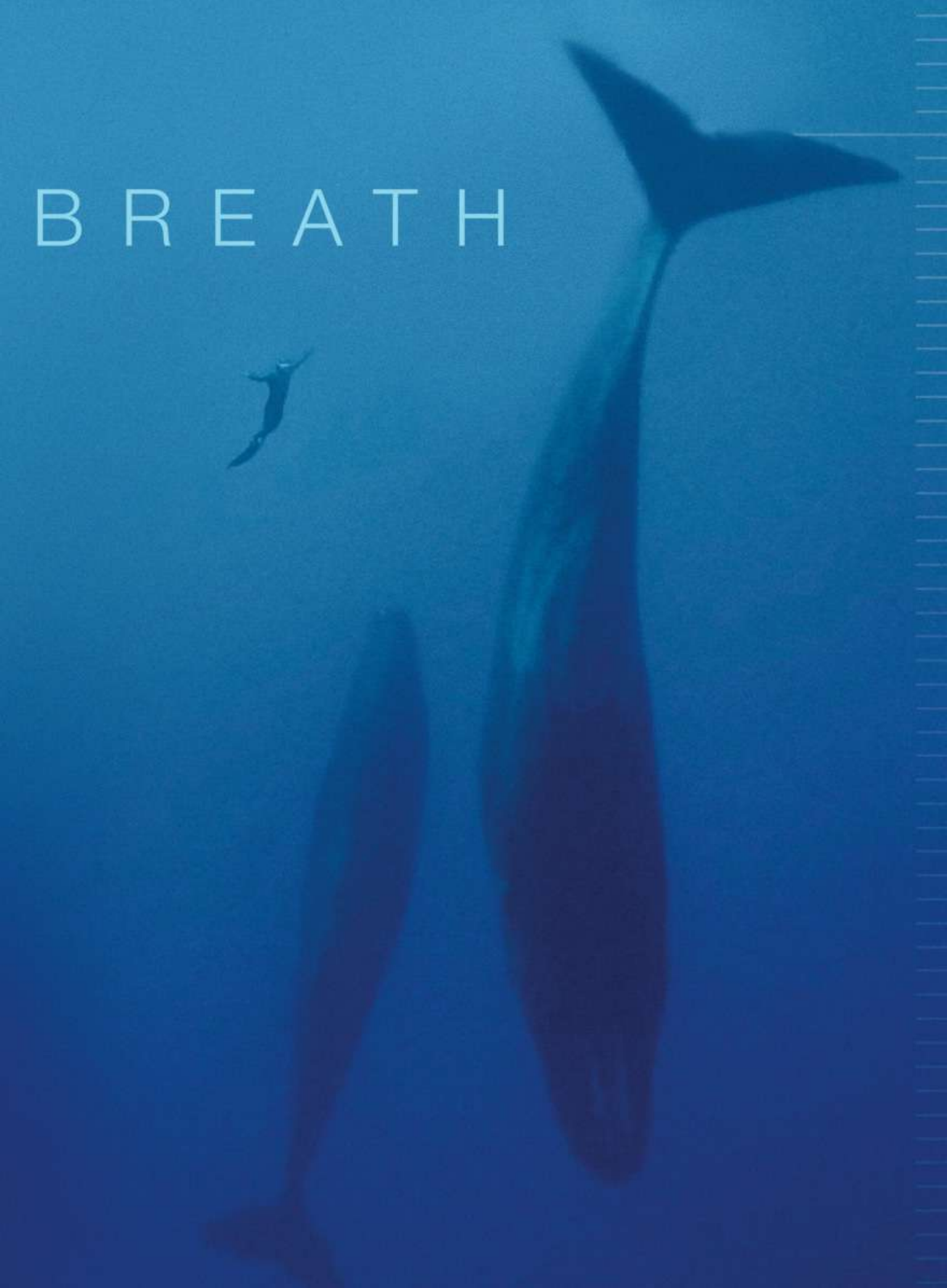
BREATH

KAIA GERBER

NYC, *April*

Who better than an It girl to officially debut what would become the most coveted kicks of the year: the Bode x Nike Astrograbbers, a retro silhouette accented with football-shaped lace charms.

MATTY MATHESON

LA, *January*

Pulling up to the Emmys red carpet in Church's fisherman sandals and fresh white socks? Chef's kiss.

DOJA CAT & JOSEPH QUINN

London, *August*

The pop provocateur, in a sheer crop top and pleated leather skirt, and the *Stranger Things* actor, in a Saks Potts shirt and high-rise slacks, walking hand in hand? A hot new celebrity-couple bombshell has entered the villa.

KENDRICK LAMAR

LA, *June*

Kendrick finished off his year of relentless mic drops with a deceptively simple outfit (light-wash jeans, luxe red The Row hoodie) at his "Pop Out" concert.

JEREMY ALLEN WHITE & ROSALÍA

LA, *July*

The unlikely—if fleeting—coupling of the Brooklynite actor and the Catalan pop star appeared as gritty and romantic as, say, a threadbare muscle tee and some studded ballet flats.

SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER

Indianapolis, *February*

The tunnel-fit god honored the late Virgil Abloh with this custom Gruppo Vava jacket covered in candy-hued V patches, which matched his Chrome Hearts trousers.

KAIA GERBER: BROSNYC/BACKGRID. KENDRICK LAMAR: ANDRES TARDIO. DOJA CAT, JOSEPH QUINN: WJ_IMAGES/BACKGRID. JEREMY ALLEN WHITE, ROSALÍA: BACKGRID. MATTY MATHESON: MICHAEL BUCKNER/VARIETY VIA GETTY IMAGES. SHAI GILGEOUS-ALEXANDER: JUSTIN CASTERLINE/GETTY IMAGES.

LONGINES SPIRIT
FLYBACK

Elegance is an attitude

LONGINES

MATTY HEALY

LA, *June*

If the 1975's charmingly trollish frontman had you considering buying those $30 barefoot booties—even for a second!—then, well, the joke's on you. Those vintage Adidas track flares, though, are another story.

JACOB ELORDI

Milan, *September*

Days before wrapping his portrayal of Frankenstein's pallid monster in the upcoming Guillermo del Toro adaptation, the famously six-foot-five actor looked relaxed and sun-kissed at Bottega Veneta's spring show.

ADAN BANUELOS & BELLA HADID

NYC, *September*

The horse-loving supermodel and her equestrian-pro boyfriend lent some country to the city in their matching Western belt buckles, hip-huggers, and cowboy hats.

WILLEM DAFOE

Paris, *October*

Twelve years after walking Prada's fall 2012 runway, the character actor par excellence closed the spring 2025 show for sister brand Miu Miu in a sharp navy coat, sheeny gray trousers, and buckled boots.

POST MALONE

Las Vegas, *February*

A month before Posty collaborated with Beyoncé on a song called "Levii's Jeans," he wore a killer pair of Wranglers while trilling a rendition of "America the Beautiful" ahead of Super Bowl LVIII.

KIM YEJI

Paris, *July*

One moment the South Korean sharpshooter was winning a silver medal in an air pistol event at the Olympics; the next, the whole internet was clamoring for her to be cast as a swaggy *John Wick* villain.

STEFON DIGGS

NYC, *May*

For his first red carpet as a Houston Texan, the star wide receiver—and overall best-dressed player in the NFL—hit his second-ever Met Gala in a custom glittering set by H&M. A man of the people!

POST MALONE: PERRY KNOTTS/GETTY IMAGES. MATTY HEALY: BRUCE/JAVILES/BACKGRID. KIM YEJI: CHARLES McQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGES. JACOB ELORDI: ARNOLD JEROCKI/GETTY IMAGES. WILLEM DAFOE: GIOVANNI GIANNONI/WWD VIA GETTY IMAGES. ADAN BANUELOS, BELLA HADID: GOTHAM/GETTY IMAGES. STEFON DIGGS: THE HAPA BLONDE/GC IMAGES

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GQ World Sports

How the WNBA Became the Most Fun, Complicated, and Exciting League in Sports

Caitlin Clark! A'ja Wilson! Angel Reese! This year, women's hoops emerged as a dominant pop-cultural force. But the road to sports-league supremacy has been long and winding. This is the inside story of how the W finally broke through.

By EMMA CARMICHAEL

BEFORE THIS YEAR, the last WNBA All-Star Game I covered in person was in 2009 at Mohegan Sun, the casino off I-95 that has been home to the Connecticut Sun since 2003. I'd paid my own way to be there, and I never got paid for the story I published afterward. The Houston Comets, the most dominant team in league history, had folded less than a year earlier, and the WNBA had just cut team rosters from 13 to 11, amounting to a 39-player layoff. It was the Great Recession, and distinctly not a time for growth, or even optimism, in women's basketball. "The big vision is to grow this business," then league president Donna Orender told reporters before the 2009 season. "Sometimes in order to do that, you have to take a little bit of a step sideways."

Fifteen years later, the league is moving forward, and at a remarkable clip. In July, I found myself covering another WNBA All-Star Game, this time in Phoenix. The three-day event was dizzying and overscheduled in all the ways an event of this magnitude is supposed to be—but for the WNBA has simply never been before. Tickets sold out six weeks before tipoff, and downtown signage announcing the

ILLUSTRATION BY KAGAN McLEOD

ACES
INDIANA
22

GQ World Sports

This season, rookies like Angel Reese, left, with Commissioner Cathy Engelbert, and Caitlin Clark, center, have given the league a shot in the arm—while W icons like Liberty mascot Ellie the Elephant have continued to do what they do best.

ELLIE THE ELEPHANT: DAVID DOW/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES. ARIKE OGUNBOWALE, CAITLIN CLARK, ALLISHA GRAY: JUAN OCAMPO/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES. ANGEL REESE, CATHY ENGELBERT: SARAH STIER/GETTY IMAGES.

game and ads for players' sneaker deals were as unavoidable as the baking desert heat. Around the city, there were enough panels and private parties to get lost in—or turned away from at the door.

"If you're in the city, you know it's All-Star," Jess Smith, the incoming president of the Golden State Valkyries, the league's first expansion team in 17 years, told me in Phoenix. "I had four parties last night! That seems typical, but it wasn't."

For the first time since 2008, the league is expanding. It will grow from 12 teams to 15 by 2026, with plans to add another by 2028; a week after All-Star Weekend, commissioner Cathy Engelbert announced a landmark media rights deal worth about $200 million annually. This year's rookie class, led by former college rivals Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese, has taken the league's simmering popularity to a new level, and ushered in a new generation of fans. The W has never had more attention or capital, and has a growing lineage of athletes who have worked tirelessly to improve their sport—against the odds and without the pay and respect they have deserved—for the past 28 years.

But all that added attention has not made for an easy transition. It has been, in other ways, a taxing year to be a close follower of the WNBA, much less one of its players. For one, the added eyeballs have coincided with an uptick in harassment—much of it, in a league that is more than three-quarters people of color, racially motivated—and the league has been sprinting from behind to keep up with issues like player safety and mental health. There have also been more prosaic growing pains. At the All-Star Game, I was seated next to an enterprising young app founder who spent most of the game scrolling his phone. Midway through the first quarter he politely nudged me to ask if I knew who the woman posing for photos in front of us was. I looked up from my laptop. "That's Sheryl Swoopes," I told him.

Swoopes, of course, is one of the most decorated players in the history of the sport. The moment only further reminded me of the unique position the league finds itself in. So much of this growth—sold-out crowds and jubilant, expanding fan bases; the wholly disarming and welcome experience of finally seeing the public rise to meet a sport where it's at—has been earned. But the acceleration has brought a legion of new fans, along with an attendant carelessness—both about the league's storied and complicated past, and its stars, who are being forced to adapt to new pressures in real time. I spent the past few months exploring that change—what led to it, who led us there, and how it looked from the inside. It's a longer story than new W fans might realize.

"This game did not happen overnight," the former pro and legendary South Carolina coach Dawn Staley reminded a tightly packed crowd at a panel during All-Star Weekend. "We're finally getting a chance to see them—like, *really* see them—and the misconception is that we just started getting great. They've been doing this for such a long time."

ABOUT THOSE NUMBERS: It was a hockey stick year in the WNBA. The league's network partners (ESPN/ABC, CBS, and Ion) saw high-double- and triple-digit increases in viewership. Indiana's Clark and Chicago's Reese are behind much of that tidal wave: An early-summer Fever-Sky game was the most viewed WNBA matchup on ESPN in 23 years, and Clark played in 19 of the 22 regular-season game telecasts that averaged at least 1 million viewers this season.

These growth figures are staggering and persuasive. They are also almost numbingly consistent. Seeing triple-digit growth virtually across the board contributes to a sense that the storied league and its 144 players just…magically sprung up from the concrete in May, fully formed and flourishing. But there are roots to what got us here, a whole history of prolonged strategy and thoughtfulness, as well as false starts and ebbs and flows.

GQ SPORTS
THE REAL ACTION IS OFF THE COURT
GET TO KNOW THE BIGGEST ATHLETES ON EARTH AT GQ.COM/SPORTS

GQ World Sports

Courtney Williams and the Minnesota Lynx tangled with the New York Liberty in the WNBA Finals—a capstone to the league's blockbuster season.

NATHANIEL S. BUTLER/NBAE VIA GETTY IMAGES.

The WNBA debuted with eight teams in 1997, during another boom time for women's hoops. By 2000 the league had doubled its number of franchises to 16. In 2002, the W—which had previously been owned by the NBA as a single entity—was restructured to allow for individual ownership of its franchises. This led to a number of teams moving locations, changing ownership, or folding altogether. While viewership and attendance were still on the rise in 2008, after the recession hit, things started to trend downhill.

"The league started off with this big boom and a lot of advertising dollars and TV money, and then it was sort of like, 'Well, maybe we should pull this back a little bit, because ticket and sponsorship sales aren't where they need to be,'" New York Liberty CEO Keia Clarke told me before a sold-out game recently. "And many franchises decided to cut marketing budgets in a quest for profitability."

Engelbert was hired from Deloitte in 2019, where she had served as the firm's first woman CEO, and introduced a three-pillar rebranding and growth plan to improve fan engagement, player experience, and stakeholder success. She also started raising money. "We weren't viewed as a legitimate sports entertainment property," she told me this summer. "We had no capital. When I came in, I had one marketing person." She now has 25—a move representative of her focus on raising the league's corporate stature.

With the pandemic, Engelbert faced a crucial test early in her tenure. From July to October 2020, the W played an abbreviated season at an enclosed campus in Florida known as the Wubble. Engelbert was told she had a 2 percent chance of it being successful. "If we don't have a season that year, we're probably not existing today," Engelbert said. "It was such an existential time for the league because we weren't coming from a position of strength." She hosted the draft that year from her house, with her two children running wrinkled jerseys through the dryer's steam cycle so that she could hold them up on camera.

With more people home to watch what was on, the W got more airtime, and—what do you know?—viewership climbed 68 percent from 2019 to 2020. A new collective bargaining agreement signed in 2020 allocated more money for marketing and promotional agreements. These days, Engelbert said, "There's almost not an ad spot in any major sporting event that now doesn't have a WNBA player."

A receptive market is a welcome shift. Smith, the incoming Valkyries president, said that when she first started working in women's sports, potential partners always asked the same question: *What exactly is this?* "We were doing so much educating," she said. Now, "these massive brands have women's sports strategies for the first time." Engelbert brought aboard a trio of "changemaker" sponsors, namely Deloitte, AT&T, and Nike, which became the league's uniform partner in 2018.

This backing was evident in Phoenix, where I kept bumping into brand giveaways and CMOs eager to talk up women's sports. The prize money for All-Star Weekend's three-point shoot-out and skills competition served as yet another line in the sand. Compared to the NBA's prizes, which start at $55,000, the women were set to receive just $2,575, and, heading into Phoenix, interest in participating remained low. Then Women's National Basketball Players Association (WNBPA) president Nneka Ogwumike announced on X that Aflac would be "supplementing the league's pay with a $55,000 bonus" for both challenges' winners. Earlier that week, it turned out, the union reached out to superagency CAA to canvass for brands interested in padding out the prize money; Bri Hamilton, a CAA rep, got Aflac's CMO, Garth Knutson, on the line. The initial ask was for $25,000 for each prize. "[Knutson] interrupted and let them know that he was going to double it," Hamilton told me. "He was going to match what the NBA players get." When Atlanta's Allisha Gray won *both* contests a couple days later, she took about two-thirds of her annual salary in a single night. It was an unprecedented windfall in the sport—and probably one of the few times in world history that a woman has gotten paid thanks to a man interrupting a woman on a call.

It also highlighted how immediately salable the league's talent is at this moment. "You're seeing two sides," Minnesota Lynx star Napheesa Collier said. "You're seeing the investment that people make in women, which is really awesome." But we're also seeing the business calculation, she continues. "They're trying to make a profit off this too. This is not some kind of thing they're doing for charity."

FOR ALL THE league's commercial success, that money doesn't tell half the story. The only reason any of this is valuable today is because of the committed *(continued on page 154)*

"The money behind this now, you can't deny," said Golden State Valkyries president Jess Smith. "Nobody's going to let it fail."

BALENCIAGA

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MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

DWAYNE JOHNSON

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST Actor

It's hard for Dwayne Johnson to hide. Wherever he goes, there he is—as conspicuous out in the world as he is on the silver screen. But after two decades of playing a version of himself in huge movies, suddenly Dwayne Johnson is ready to do something entirely new: vanish.

By **Zach Baron** | Photographs by **Eli Russell Linnetz** | Styled by **Heidi Bivens**

←←
PREVIOUS PAGE
jacket and shorts
Balenciaga
tank top
Dolce & Gabbana

THESE PAGES
t-shirt
Velva Sheen
jeans
Levi's
belt
John Varvatos
handkerchief, stylist's own
his own necklace (worn as bracelet)
Jacquie Aiche

not that Dwayne Johnson is tall, though he is—about six feet four inches and broad, with an adamantine bald head and sculptural shoulders. It's not that he is part Samoan, part Black, though he is that too. It's not even that Johnson is what Hollywood likes to euphemistically call the most successful movie star alive, meaning, most years, the highest paid. It's that these things—the shape of the man, his parents, his professional ascendance—have combined in a singular way to make him recognizable at more or less any distance. Because of this, Johnson struggles, in the most prosaic sense, to be alone.

He can count the number of places available to him for solitude on three mighty fingers, and does. He can go sit inside his truck, which he likes to drive to set no matter what city he is in, in part because his silhouette is less noticeable behind the wheel of a car. He can go to his gym. Or he can come here, to the generous property he owns in rural Virginia, with a three-acre pond and a horse barn and green hills and a Victorian-style house of slightly exaggerated, Dwayne Johnson–esque proportions.

Anywhere else, Johnson says, and he's probably surrounded by people—other actors, directors, executives, businesspeople, employees, fans, journalists, children, wife (Lauren Hashian) and ex-wife (Dany Garcia, who is still Johnson's business partner). "I feel like the moment I walk out the door," he says, "that's when the whirlwind starts." He is mostly okay with this. When I ask Johnson, who used to regularly perform live in sold-out arenas as a professional wrestler known as The Rock—Johnson's first real career, and the thing that first made him famous—whether he is comfortable around other people, he seems genuinely confused about the question. "Oh yeah," Johnson says. "For sure. Like…am I an asshole?"

In my experience: no. Johnson is in fact famous for remembering your name and your kid's name and your kid's grandparents' names, a.k.a. the names of your parents, whom he wishes well in their next life chapter of retirement, etc. He observes closely, asks a lot of questions. His art is the art of being himself. There is only one guy remotely like him, and that guy would love to get to know you, and have you know him in turn.

He is from a showbiz family, and in some ways that's all he knows. His mother, to whom Johnson attributes his kindness and his interest in other people, grew up as part of a Samoan wrestling dynasty. His father, Rocky Johnson, who died four years ago, was, like his son, a professional wrestler. "I think the connective tissue between my childhood growing up and what I do today is performing, for sure," Johnson says. "Watching my dad perform and just being around an audience, even if it was a small audience."

Today, his default pace is 100 miles per hour. To take this random Thursday in August: A couple weeks ago, Johnson was in Japan, finishing shooting a drama called *The Smashing Machine.* Shortly after that, Johnson appeared at a Disney event to announce that he will soon star in a new film, called *Monster Jam*. This fall, two movies Johnson has already completed, *Red One* and *Moana 2,* will be released. And on Monday, he'll go back to work, filming a new live-action version of *Moana*. Johnson's work in Hollywood and, lately, in business (tequila, skin care) have made him something not too far from a billionaire; he could retire tomorrow, or even today. But this level of activity is typical and has made Johnson unbelievably successful: Every morning he wakes up, busily performs the character of Dwayne Johnson, and the empire grows.

That character has been remarkably consistent, at least onscreen, since Johnson began his film career in 2001's *The Mummy Returns.* Johnson plays people who are big and broad in movies that are big and broad and for everyone. This is—or was—by design: Wherever he went, he made sure the largest possible audience could follow. Until recently, anyway.

This year, Johnson chose to produce and star in *The Smashing Machine,* in which he plays a character based on an early MMA fighter named Mark Kerr, who rose to prominence in the '90s and whose struggles with addiction nearly killed him. It is a part that's closer to Johnson's own life than perhaps he's ever attempted. *The Smashing Machine* is also unlike any other movie Johnson has chosen in the past: darker, realer, not for everyone. The film comes not from one of the major studios but from A24, and is directed by Benny Safdie, whose prior films with his brother, Josh, have been the antithesis of what Johnson has gravitated toward. And yet what Johnson found was that working on the film activated stuff in him that was long dormant. It reminded him what it was like to be someone else—someone other than Dwayne Johnson.

Emily Blunt, a close friend of Johnson's who costarred with him in both 2021's *Jungle Cruise* and *The Smashing Machine,* says she noticed in the past few years a certain weariness setting in with the way Johnson had been doing business. "I think he'd been feeling a fatigue at being the person that everyone expects him to be," Blunt says. "I think that idea that he wasn't immune to wanting something else, you know? There was a fatigue there with how he was going about things."

The Smashing Machine was an opportunity to be a different person entirely. To lose himself, at least a little bit, and "disappear into a character," as Johnson says.

Before Dwayne Johnson grew up and became The Rock, he was just an itinerant kid, with a family that often lived paycheck to paycheck. "I was an only child," he says. He attended a new school—North Carolina,

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Connecticut, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Florida, Georgia, Washington, Hawaii—almost every year. "I spent a lot of my childhood in the back seat of a car just driving from town to town as my dad would wrestle," Johnson says. Places nobody knew him. Places where he was unknown, invisible.

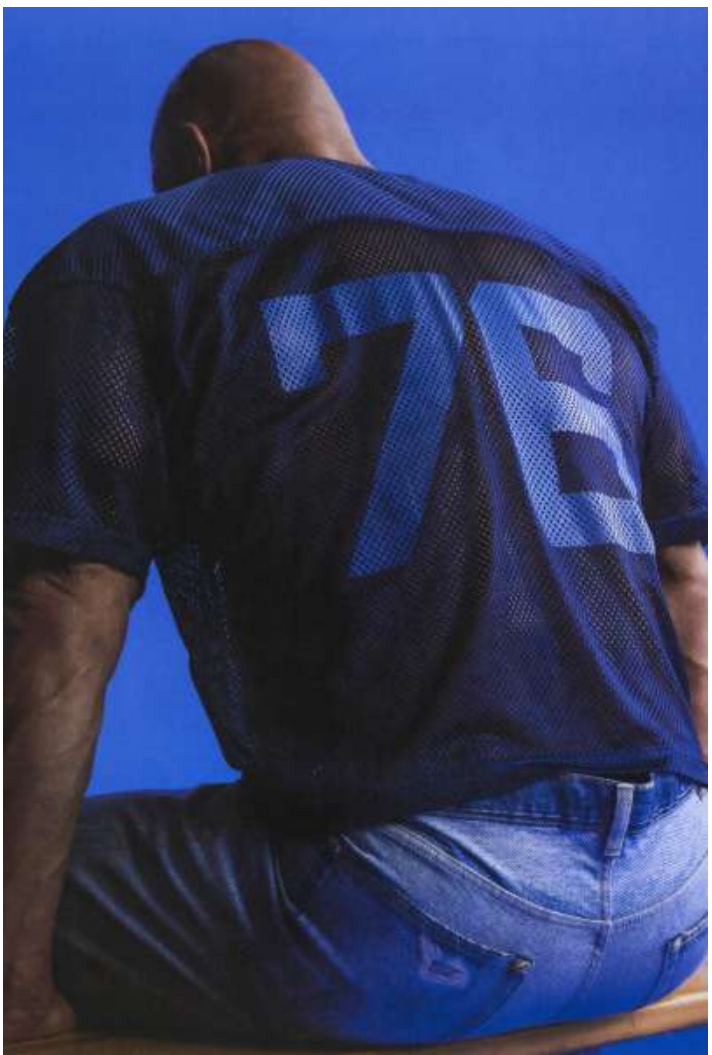
Today, there is something in him that still craves that feeling. Fifteen years ago, Johnson found this farm. It scratched that itch, that feeling of being in the back seat by himself. Many times he comes here without even his family. "I think if you see the energy of the whirlwind that happens," he says, "for me, I need a place where literally I see no one."

Johnson says this earnestly to me, as we walk across one of the lush green fields on the property, with a *GQ* camera crew and Johnson's own social media team both filming us. Such are the paradoxes of being Dwayne Johnson.

No one. "Except for me," I say.

"Except for you," Johnson says. "I'm gonna throw you in the lake."

JOHNSON CALLS THIS lake—a wedge-shaped pond—Mana Lake, after a Polynesian word that roughly translates to "energy." It was initially cleared out by biologists from the University of Virginia, who helped establish the pond's ecosystem, and then stocked with largemouth and striped bass, sunfish, and carp by a private company that carefully monitors and maintains the pond's habitat. (When I make a passing joke about this—"That's some real rich-guy shit right there" is what I say; I'm not particularly proud of this—Johnson later sends me an eight-minute voice note, explaining in detail his thought process about the scientists and the habitat he hired them to build.) Johnson likes to rise with the sun and either ride his four-wheeler around the property or come here to fish. Today, he's brought me a rod as well.



"Do you know how to work the pole?" he asks as he hands it over, grinning.

Johnson likes the calmness of fishing. He likes the strategy. And, he says, it reminds him of his father. "It was a thing that I was able to do with my old man—one of the things that we would do to spend time together, which wasn't a lot of stuff. But fishing was one of them."

It was a rare constant as the family crisscrossed the country to follow Rocky's wrestling engagements, which would typically last for just a year. "We'd always carry fishing poles in the trunk. And as we're rolling along the highway, if we saw a body of water somewhere, he'd be like, 'Hey, let's stop and fish.'"

It's around this time that I cast my lure not into the water but onto the grassy bank next to the water, and Johnson gently steps in with a few pointers.

"Let it go sooner," he says. I do. It works.

"There you go!" he says, like a proud dad—Johnson has three daughters—and I ask him if his father was the same way.

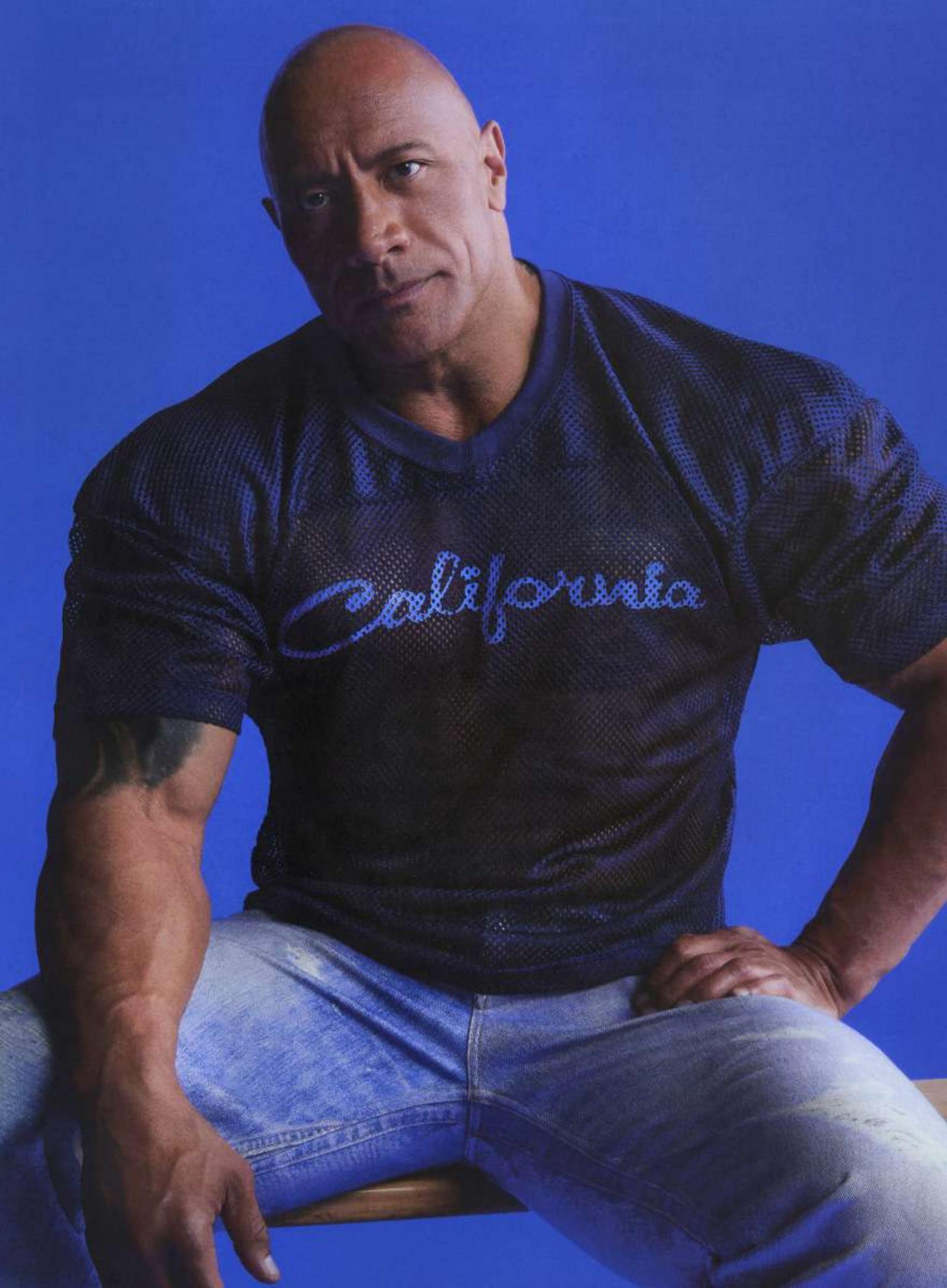
"It was tough love with him," Johnson says. "Very little patience with shit. And he came up in an era where he had to fight for everything. Black pro wrestler at that time in the '60s and '70s, mainly throughout the South. So, you know, you can imagine not only in the South but then pro wrestling. And at that time, that crowd, that pro wrestling crowd was not what it is today. Today it's very diverse. Back then, pro wrestling was super white. Um, so, very little patience—nice cast. There we go."

"Very little patience," I remind Johnson.

"Very little patience. Raised me with a tough hand and physical. Didn't beat my ass or anything like that, but just our bonding was—at a very young age—you could come to the gym with me at five and six years old, but you just gotta sit. So I sat in the gym and just watched him and his wrestler workout buddies work out." This would happen in towns all across the country, Johnson says. "And then, at six, seven, eight, what he would do then after he was done working out, he would take me on the wrestling mats at the gym. Because usually he was at a YMCA or a Boys Club or something like that. He'd beat my ass that way, in terms of teaching me wrestling basics and things like that."

Johnson attributes his life as an actor and a wrestler to the things he was around as a kid, watching his dad work. "But also I think just growing up in the way that I did and having to grow up very fast," he says. "By the time I hit 13, 14, 15, a lot of shit went down in my life."

Thirteen, specifically, is a number that comes up a lot with Johnson. "By the time I was 13, my parents were already on the fritz, and everything came to me to try and solve and figure out," Johnson says. Thirteen is also the age that his father, Rocky, was first forced to leave home. Johnson has told the story before: Rocky, then just a boy, confronting his mother's drunken boyfriend at the time, only to have his mother choose the boyfriend over the son. "Once I got older and *(text continued on page 90)*


California

sweater
(over shoulders)
Paul Stuart

sweater
Diesel

pants
Bode

↑
jacket, shorts, and sneakers
Balenciaga
tank top
Dolce & Gabbana
leggings
ERL

→
hoodie, t-shirt, and sweatpants
ERL

barbering by rachel solow. skin by bjoern rehbein. tailoring by yelena travkina. set design by james rene. produced by tightrope production.

I understood, and then I really began to understand that my dad loved me with the capacity that he did," Johnson says. "He was thrown out of the house at 13, as you know. When you're thrown out at 13 and your mom picks her boyfriend over you, that's a hard place to come back from. And that will inform how you love people and what you care for in life and how you care about people. So it was really fucked up—that really damaged my dad. So his limited capacity to love is what raised me."

How do you think he felt about your success, given that you went into his business?

"I don't think he liked it. No. But that's okay. It's okay because contextually he was kicked out at 13. That informed how he loved, that informed his empathy, his capacity, all these things. I didn't realize that until much later."

Johnson's first dream was to be a professional football player. He was a defensive tackle at the University of Miami, played with future Hall of Famers Warren Sapp and Ray Lewis. But football did not work out. Then it occurred to Johnson: "I think I'm going to like professional wrestling. So we fought. He didn't want me to get into it. And then I wound up having the career that I had. And he was proud. But he also wrestled with a lot of my success, and I know that as his son."

A lot of people would be angrier than you seem to be.

"It's different, though, Zach, because my dad, you know, he's walking in the clouds now. And I think when he was around, my perspective on this was different. And we still had a contentious kind of complicated relationship when he was alive. And it would be loving, it would be complicated, loving, complicated. It would vacillate back and forth all the time. So when he dies suddenly four years ago, and you don't get a chance to say goodbye, you don't get a chance to right the shit that you want to right, meaning make it right? You look at things differently."

Johnson says he inherited from his father the idea of "fighting for something that you believe in." He says Rocky gave him his love of country music, of Willie Nelson and Hank Senior and Waylon Jennings. And "I think one of the most important things that I learned from my dad," Johnson says, "is that regardless of your circumstances, even if things are fucked up around you, you can change that by going to work."

Rocky died in 2020. "I've had this place for 15 years, but he never had a chance to make it out here," Johnson says, which probably tells you what you need to know about what it was like between the two of them toward the end. "He would've loved it, though."

At this point my rod seems to bend, and Johnson is excited.

"Did you get a fish?"

I think maybe I did. But then my catch reveals itself: a tree branch.

"Stick fish," Johnson says, cheerfully. The camera crews continue to film.

"Actually, here, let me see that, Zach," he says, taking the fishing rod. "I'm gonna cast it for you."

IN *RED ONE*, Johnson plays Santa Claus's bodyguard. It's a testament to Johnson's ability to sell a role based on more or less any premise—Special Forces–trained primatologist who teams up with a rage-prone gorilla; immortal riverboat guide; Polynesian trickster demigod—that you probably didn't blink at the "Santa Claus's bodyguard" thing. There are actors who act because of some compulsion to explore the darker parts of themselves, or express emotions they otherwise do not have access to. Johnson, to date, has not been this kind of actor. He has, by and large, chosen projects to entertain.

"Part of his gift, particularly in communicating with his audience, is that he is able to present himself to a large audience in a way that is deeply authentic," says the director Jake Kasdan, who has worked with Johnson on three films, the most recent of which is the upcoming *Red One*. "There's a reason we've done so many projects with him," Alan Bergman, the co-chairman of Disney Entertainment, says. *Moana 2,* the most recent of those projects, represents the continuation of a growing *Moana* empire that also includes a Disney theme park attraction that opened last year and the studio's upcoming live-action film. Johnson has an ability to scale in a way that other actors simply don't. "The audience can see that he loves and believes in what he's doing," Bergman says.

"Before I got to the WWE, I wrestled in a small wrestling company called the USWA," Johnson says. The USWA was based in Tennessee. "Those were the days where I was making 40 bucks per match wrestling in flea markets and used-car dealerships in the parking lot. But guaranteed $40! I ate Waffle House three times a day. What you learn there in cutting your teeth in that world of pro wrestling at that level is to do your best to send everybody home happy." Years later, Johnson says, "when I got into the business of Hollywood and moviemaking, it's like, Okay, well, what kind of movies do I want to make? I want to make movies that hopefully are good, that don't suck. But also reach as many people as possible." *(continued on page 156)*

WALKMAN FM/AM

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

JOHN MULANEY

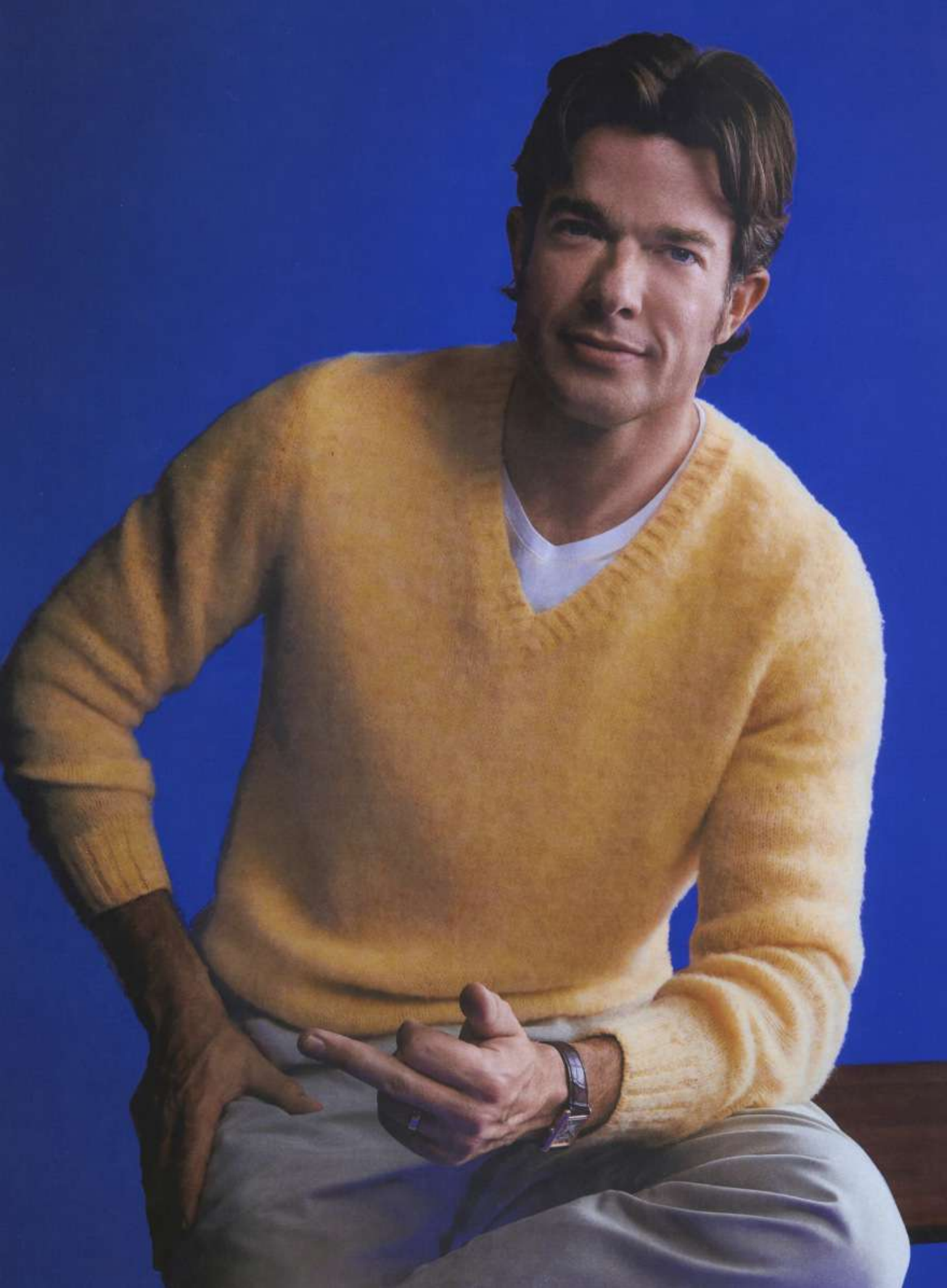
KID GORGEOUS GROWS UP

After immortalizing the whirlwind of the past four years—relapse, intervention, recovery—in his award-winning stand-up special, John Mulaney has emerged as one of the most popular comedians on earth. For his next trick, he's embracing his surprising new role as a suburban dad.

By **Brett Martin**

Photographs by **Eli Russell Linnetz**

Styled by **Jon Tietz**



THREE STONE DEITIES stand watch over the entrance of the Asian Garden Mall, in Orange County's Little Saigon. The mall is a cultural hub for Southern California's enormous Vietnamese population. Old men sit nearby, smoking and talking heatedly over newspapers—actual newspapers—beneath a waving South Vietnamese flag. A steady stream of visitors approach to take photos in front of the façade.

Among them, more natural than you might imagine possible, comes John Mulaney, pushing a stroller and pausing to rub the belly of a stone Buddha for good luck. Alongside are his mother-in-law, Dung Kim Schmid, and her husband, a mild-mannered retired optometrist named Sam. They are visiting Southern California from Oklahoma City on the occasion of the arrival of the stroller's occupant: Mulaney and wife Olivia Munn's second child, a daughter named Méi June.

They stop to regard the deity statues: Phước representing fortune; Lộc, prosperity; and Thọ, longevity. "Would you really want the longevity if you don't have the prosperity and fortune?" Mulaney muses, though it wasn't all that long ago that he was in danger of having exactly the opposite problem.

If this seems a strange place to find yourself at the start of a profile of John Mulaney, you might consider how John Mulaney feels. Once such a consummate urbanite that you half expected to see a pigeon on his head and his pockets stuffed with takeout menus, today he looks every inch a suburban dad, in his white lace-up Vans, olive jeans, long-sleeve shirt. Only days ago, he and his family, which also includes Malcolm, who is nearly three, moved into a new house overlooking the ocean. With Méi came a massive, new three-row SUV, though, frankly, it seems like a lot of car for John Mulaney, much less a tiny baby.

Sometimes, he says, he imagines himself a character in the TV show *Quantum Leap* who somehow ended up in the body of a dad at Sky Zone, the chain of indoor trampoline parks. "I would come to in all these foam blocks, which have absorbed a *lot* of human sweat over the years and are very hard to climb out of, with my son standing above me," he says.

Here are the facts of how the past four years led him to this peculiar place: In 2020, while living in New York City, he entered rehab, for addiction to cocaine and a smorgasbord of pharmaceuticals. He and his wife, Anna Marie Tendler, split up. He relapsed. He went back to rehab, this time with the help of a starry intervention that has since passed into legend thanks to his Emmy-winning Netflix special, *Baby J.* This time, the sobriety stuck. Soon after, he connected with Munn and, soon after that, it became known that she was pregnant.

This cascade of revelations about his personal life came as a surprise to fans who thought they knew Mulaney better than they did. Some of those fans freaked out. *Parasocial* became the word of the moment.

Once Mulaney and Munn decided to raise their son together, Mulaney moved to Los Angeles where, among other things, he eventually produced the six-night fever dream of a talk-show experiment, *John Mulaney Presents: Everybody's in L.A.*, 12 new episodes of which are scheduled to air live on Netflix sometime in late February.

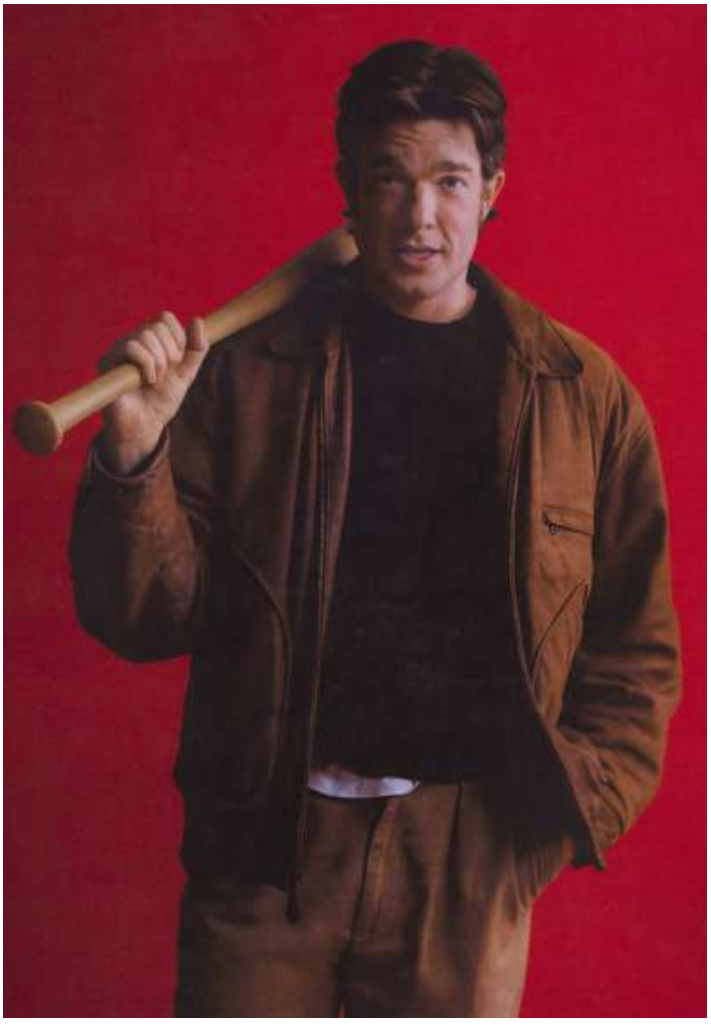
Inside the mall, we pass by jewelry and clothing stores; gift shops filled with dragon figurines and bobblehead Buddhas; a food court offering pho, congee, and plates of sea snails in various sauces. We find a bench near a stage with a banner wishing everybody a happy Tê't Trung Thu, or Mid-Autumn Festival.

Another metaphor he likes, appropriate for his new Oklahoman family: "It was like a tornado picked me up, head to toe, hip to hip. And I landed somewhere extremely lucky and nice, where I'm having the best time in life."

Indeed, if this is Oz, it seems to suit him. He has always been handsome, but time and sobriety have both softened and strengthened his features. Gone is the jangled angularity of a character in a hand-cranked Kinetoscope about to break into the Charleston. In its place, he has added an unexpected superhero jaw. His old drug habits, as he describes them, were an exhausting back-and-forth

←←
PREVIOUS PAGE
sweater
Prada
t-shirt from
ERL Vintage Archive
vintage pants
Banana Republic
watch
Cartier
ring (throughout), his own

↓
vintage jacket
Banana Republic
sweater
Nili Lotan
t-shirt from
ERL Vintage Archive
vintage pants
Banana Republic from the Society Archive



jacket
Loro Piana
shirt and socks
(throughout)
J.Crew
pants,
stylist's own
tie
Polo Ralph Lauren
shoes from
Crowley Vintage

of self-medication for a litany of supposed infirmities, more like biohacking than partying. But when the drugs went, so did the infirmities.

"There was a time when I would have told you that I could not fly, sleep, or perform unless I had a Klonopin," he says. "I thought I had serious light sensitivity onstage. Spotlights had to be at a super-low grade. The front row had to be lit, because I thought I had a spatial…not vertigo, but something like that. I would have said, 'It sucks, because I don't always *want* to take Klonopin and Xanax, but I *have* to.'"

What about the ADHD he so often mentioned in his act? Funny thing: When he reluctantly allowed himself to be tested in rehab, he turned out not only to not have the condition but to possess "superior retention of facts and details." This is something that would not surprise the audiences in front of whom he makes a habit of doing 10 tight minutes of site-specific material on Cincinnati or

sweater
Drake's
t-shirt from
ERL Vintage Archive
pants
J.Crew
watch
Rolex

Biloxi or Charlotte while many touring comedians might hardly remember what city they are in.

Today happens to be Mulaney's mother-in-law's 69th birthday. Everybody calls Miss Kim "Miss Kim," including her husband, to whom she has been married for nearly 25 years. She left Saigon with her mother and eight siblings in 1975. Miss Kim's become something of a cult figure since she began popping up on Mulaney's Instagram feed and in the stories he tells on talk shows. In August, she came along to an appearance on *Late Night With Seth Meyers,* where she stole the show while sitting in the audience. "If I did a perfectly accurate impersonation of my mother-in-law, it would be a career ender," Mulaney acknowledged that night. That he eventually went for it and nevertheless avoided cancellation may be due in part to the affection between the two being so palpably genuine.

"John has seamlessly fit in with my mom and aunts in a way that I have never been able to," says Munn, with a hint of an eye roll. "They love the same movies. They love the same Vietnamese gossip."

Mulaney confirms, "Every day I can be like, 'Have you talked to Phung today? Have you talked to Hoan? What's going on with her cataracts?' It's my own reality show. A series that never ends."

Munn calls the pair "the new *Oh, Hello,"* referring to the *alter kaker* duo that Mulaney and his college friend Nick Kroll periodically portray.

When I ask Miss Kim how she feels about her newfound fame, she makes it clear that there's nothing new about it. "I am *Olivia Munn's mother!"* she says, mock indignant, as she and Sam go off in search of T-shirts. The last time Mulaney hosted *Saturday Night Live,* he wore a shirt with Malcolm's Chinese astrological sign, the golden ox. With another hosting gig coming up—his sixth—he wants one with Méi's, the wood dragon.

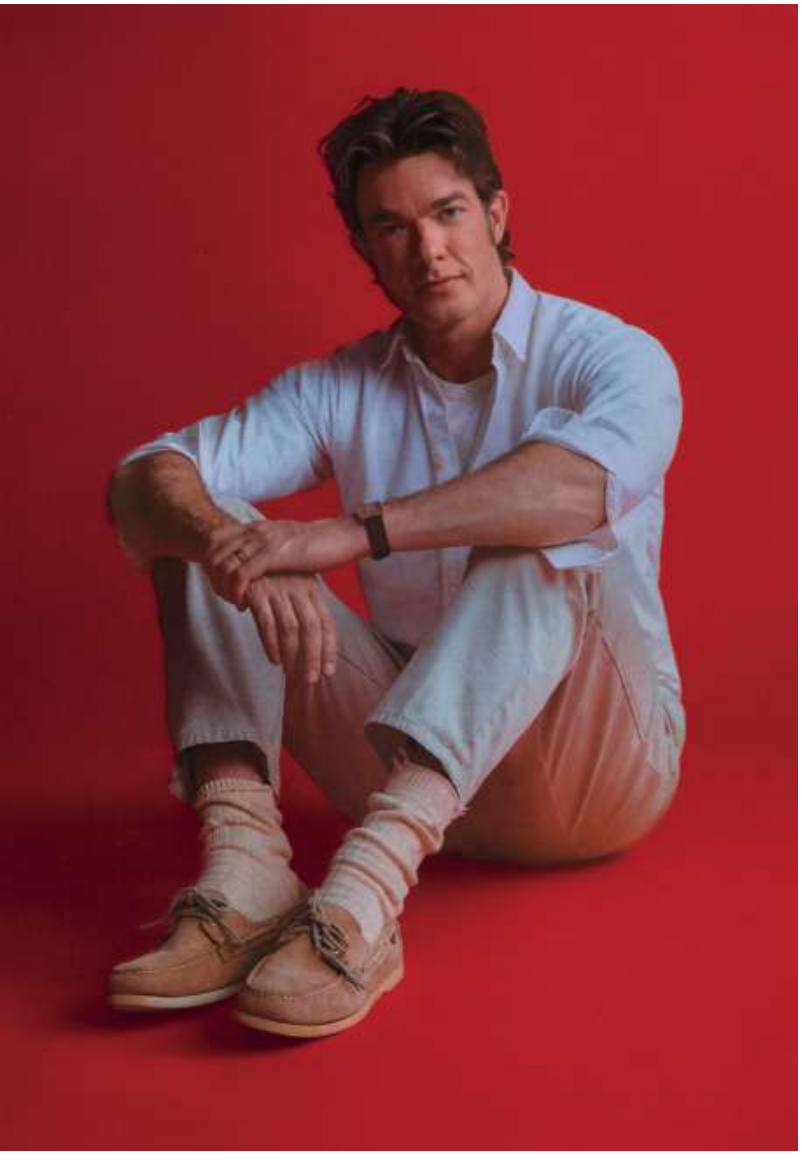
Méi, who was born to a surrogate only 11 days ago, is impossibly fresh, hands still covered with tiny white mittens to prevent her from scratching herself. Mulaney lifts her gingerly from the stroller, like a bag of limes, supporting her neck as he reaches for a bottle of formula. "Méi, I am so…*curious* about you," he tells her.

From the moment of Malcolm's birth, in 2021, Mulaney has very publicly embraced fatherhood. "I've always been good at working with and for unreasonable people—people that are just against logic and the rules of time and space," he says. "Malcolm sometimes feels like one

of those bosses: 'Why is your hair wet?? Make it dry!' And I'm like, 'That's actually one of the more difficult things to do quickly!'"

In short, he seems like a happy man who is understandably eager to demonstrate his happiness. He's allowed his hair to get longer and scruff to grow on his face. Nothing you might even notice on another face, but if you're inclined to see facial hair as the most obvious way for men to externally broadcast internal change, it may be the most significant tonsorial development in comedy since David Letterman went full hillbilly. What it feels like is a sign that Kid Gorgeous, Baby J, the Comeback Kid, the wunderkind who is perpetually New in Town, has come into his manhood.

shirt
Polo Ralph Lauren
t-shirt from
ERL Vintage Archive
vintage pants
Banana Republic
shoes
Sebago
watch
Cartier



"I CAN BE really set in my ways, in some ways," Mulaney says. "But I am very good at major transformations."

The first, as he tells it, came when he arrived in New York at age 23. Growing up in Chicago, he had told his parents early that he wanted to be a stand-up. At Georgetown University, he joined an improv group with Kroll and Mike Birbiglia. But, he says, "I had erratic work habits. I was very disorganized. In a sense I was always ambitious, but I wasn't like, 'I'm going to direct every play in high school.' I wasn't all over it in any way."

In New York, a switch flipped. "I just hit the ground running. It was all of a sudden this total focus and drive to do as much stand-up as possible," he says. "I didn't drink alcohol anymore. I didn't take any drugs. I was just totally dedicated to one thing, kind of monastically, and it was awesome."

His comedic gifts—linguistic, physical, theatrical—are evident from his earliest performances. He is an excellent impressionist but deploys the gift almost casually, like a dagger he has the luxury of keeping strapped to his ankle. He is expert at leading an audience deep into the thicket of a joke's setup and then pausing just long enough to allow them to arrive at the punch line right before he does. When it works best, a single word—say, *gradually,* in a segment of *Baby J* about his dismay at not being recognized in rehab—detonates like a bomb.

"He presents to the audience, 'I am in control. I'm not particularly interested in which of these jokes you like and which you don't, and no matter what happens, I am going to be having a very fun time,'" says Seth Meyers, describing what makes Mulaney such a good talk show guest (arguably the most perfect of his many talents) in terms that apply equally to his stand-up. "You just want to be on that ride with him."

Mulaney auditioned for *Saturday Night Live* before the 2008–2009 season but did not make the cast. Instead, he got hired as a writer. Mulaney's friend and frequent writing partner Simon Rich recalls watching his audition tape that year, before the staff convened—in particular, a bit deconstructing *Law & Order* extras. "I remember very distinctly thinking, I really, really hope that I get to write with this person," Rich says. "Part of his genius is his precision and his absolute mastery of language. You never want to paraphrase a Mulaney joke, because they're so perfectly constructed and crystalline. If you don't get it word-perfect, you're not doing it justice."

Mulaney spent only four full seasons at *SNL,* but they remain a core part of his identity, even as the pervasive hold the show maintains on the American imagination amuses him. "We're like the post office," he says. "You hate us, but you love us. At the end of the day you go, 'Look, they worked hard and got it done,' but you groan at our existence. I have found that I will never need another topic to talk about. It's like our World War II. At any event, any dinner I go to, anywhere in the world. This look comes into their eye as if you're saying, 'I'm an outlaw.' Like, 'Yeah, before this I was a cowboy.'"

Rich estimates that he and Mulaney, along with their writing partner Marika Sawyer, wrote some 250 sketches, including frequently taking on the host's monologue, on the theory that it was one segment that could never be cut. He says it was Mulaney's versatility that stood out. "He was able to write jokes that would allow every single cast member, and the host, to score, which is really hard," he says.

So consummate a writer was Mulaney that Rich was almost surprised when he finally saw him perform his

vintage jacket
Banana Republic

vintage sweatshirt, stylist's own

t-shirt from
ERL Vintage Archive

vintage jeans
Levi's from Wooden Sleepers

watch
Rolex

own stand-up: "I knew instantly that not only should this person be head writer of *SNL* someday, but this person should probably be a globally famous stand-up comic."

The thought had crossed Mulaney's mind too. In 2009 he was featured on *Comedy Central Presents*... and released an album titled *The Top Part*. In 2012 came the special *New in Town*. He had always thought of himself as part of an alternative-comedy scene that had a home at clubs like Pianos and Rififi in New York and Largo in LA but was ultimately relatively niche. "I didn't feel like we were Black Flag or anything—and I was on the straighter edge of it—but it did feel like we were weirder than the norm," Mulaney says.

Now though, he began to notice that he was getting just as big laughs on the road as he was in New York clubs. "I might've been in Madison, Wisconsin," he recalls. "It was, like, 2013. It was older parents at the show with their teen kids, and they both seemed to enjoy it. I thought: This plays in the East Village, but it's also working in Wisconsin. Maybe we should see how far we can push it."

It was around this time that Mulaney started wearing a suit. There is something disorienting about going back to Mulaney's early stand-up and finding him in a button-down shirt, oversized jeans, and sneakers. An aha moment came while headlining a club called Laughing Skull Lounge, in Atlanta, where all six comics on the bill wore that exact nerdy-white-guy outfit—and so did everyone in the crowd.

"I remember thinking, They paid money to *see* something. Why does it look like one of the audience members is standing onstage talking?" he says.

Suits do a lot of work in Mulaney's story: as uniform, as shield, as plumage, and as camouflage. He is reminded of his son's recent fascination with Elvis, especially the 1968 NBC *Comeback* special in which Presley appears, resplendent, in head-to-toe leather. "There's something about someone who's like, *I'm the entertainer here,*" he says. Indeed, one can draw a line from Elvis's getup to Eddie Murphy's leather outfits in *Delirious* and *Raw* to Mulaney's maroon suit in *Baby J*—with, he points out, Richard Pryor's red tuxedo from *Live on the Sunset Strip* somewhere in between.

Those sorts of names are helpful in grasping the shape of Mulaney's ambition. "I consciously thought, What if you did Spalding Gray with the energy of Bernie Mac?" he says. "What if what you were saying was really confessional and had an edge to it; the language was specific and nuanced; it was personal and contradictory, dark, suicidal, whatever it was—but you kept selling it with this big showbizzy energy. How big could I scale it? How big can you sell weird and specific?"

The merging of stand-up with what we once would have called "one-man shows"—and its attendant confusions—is hardly limited to Mulaney. But his work proved to be an especially well-crafted Trojan horse for smuggling the Performing Garage into the Hollywood Bowl. In 2015's *The Comeback Kid,* he delivers an extended set piece about going with his mother to meet Bill Clinton, who had been a Yale classmate of both his parents. It is, as he points out, not the most universally relatable story.

"I'm just going to *see*," he says he thought. "I'm going to see if you can do a nine-minute story about this and just hit it as though you're doing the best bit about dating ever. I'm going to tell this long story about how my parents had a complicated relationship with the Clintons, and how it sort of plays into how me and my dad relate to each other, and I am going to go onstage and fucking *annihilate* with it."

Baby J, conversely, played a shadow version of the same trick. "It's like: Okay, this is the most confessional one, so it's going to be *all jokes*," he says. "There is no moment that isn't supposed to be very entertaining."

Spalding Gray, who died by suicide in 2004, remains a North Star for Mulaney and an open influence. Gray's widow, Kathie Russo, gifted Mulaney the pull-down map of Southeast Asian bombings Gray used in his breakthrough monologue, *Swimming to Cambodia,* a prop that Mulaney paid tribute to in *Everybody's in L.A.* He says he modeled the rhythm of one of his more memorable early story-jokes, about being mistaken for a stalker in the subway, on Gray's description of skiing down a mountain in his monologue *It's a Slippery Slope.*

As it happens, that show is in part about Gray leaving his wife—who had been a longtime presence in his work and whom audiences had reason to believe they knew—to suddenly start a family with Russo. "It borders on extremely unlikable," Mulaney told Pitchfork in 2018 for a list of his favorite comedy albums. He recalled Gray telling Terry Gross at the time that he was not a nice guy. "Not a lot of people will admit that," he said. "And maybe more people should."

BY EVERY ACCOUNT, Mulaney *is* a nice guy. It's hard to imagine a person more lavishly friended up—particularly in what are supposedly the schadenfreude-soaked worlds of comedy and entertainment, not to mention drug addiction. In the deeply intertextual universe of modern comedy—in which events appear first as reality, then as a talk show bit, then part of a special, on a podcast, in a fictionalized meta-show, an animated version of a fictionalized meta-show, and so on—his intervention, featuring the likes of Kroll, Meyers, Fred Armisen, and Natasha Lyonne, has taken on such a level of romance that people openly wish they had been there. ("It was *not* funny," Kroll had to pointedly correct the comic Bert Kreischer while on his podcast.) Mulaney's post-rehab tour of late-night shows was like a seminar on supportive, sensitive masculine friendship: He and Stephen Colbert waxed philosophical about *A Man for All Seasons*; he and Meyers exchanged "I love you"s.

Mulaney swears he has non-comedian friends—the constitutional lawyer and one-time acting solicitor general Neal Katyal, for one—and even some that aren't famous. But, he says, "I have more in common with every comedian than I do with any other person."

"John is a very good friend. He's a thoughtful person and I think that his group of friends reflect that type of human being," says Jimmy Kimmel, in whose guest house Mulaney briefly lived after leaving rehab in 2021 and with whom he is on several group texts, including one "almost exclusively about the band Kiss and their merchandising opportunities." Upon leaving, Kimmel says, Mulaney left a framed photo of himself as a thank-you gift. When Méi was born, Mulaney texted Kimmel asking how much he should tip the hospital security guards.

"I do have that sunnier, cornier side," Mulaney says. "I really have said hello to balloons before."

At the same time, for all of its tour de force comedy, *Baby J* did have a couple of barbed thesis statements. One was: "Likability is a jail." The other was: "Don't believe the persona."

Mulaney declines to talk about his first marriage; he is also conspicuously absent from Tendler's memoir, published earlier this year. Of the period of tabloid fever in the year after it ended, he says, "You might think this is bullshit, but it feels very distant."

(In retrospect, Mulaney's old bits about matrimony were straight out of the borscht *(continued on page 157)*

← jacket **Polo Ralph Lauren**
shirt **Brooks Brothers**
pants from **ERL Vintage Archive**

→ sweater **Loewe**
t-shirt from **ERL Vintage Archive**

hair by thom priano for r+co bleu. skin by holly silius using retrouvé. tailoring by yelena travkina. set design by james rene. produced by tightrope production.

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

PHARRELL WILLIAMS

Designer of the Year

Riding along from Paris to Hollywood to New York with the Louis Vuitton men's creative director, whose prolific and often prophetic contributions to fashion, film, and music have once again thrust him to the center of the pop culture Venn diagram.

By **Will Welch**

Photographs by **Eli Russell Linnetz**

Styled by **Matthew Henson** and **Eli Russell Linnetz**

you're wondering how Pharrell Williams's gig at Louis Vuitton is going 20 months into his appointment, consider this: The luxury house that represents the crown jewel of Bernard Arnault's $300 billion LVMH empire has more or less tripled the footprint of its men's creative director's office at 2 rue du Pont Neuf in Paris.

Pharrell still works partially in the modest space previously occupied by his predecessor, Virgil Abloh, but the company has blown through several nearby walls, creating an airy and design-filled executive power suite. Our first interview took place on a new couch in a newly created corner room, with expansive views across the Seine to the Left Bank and beyond. "We don't do a lot of work here," Pharrell tells me. "We do a lot of dreaming and manifesting." Nearby was his gleaming new recording studio.

Speaking of music studios, Pharrell's *GQ* cover shoot took place two days after our Paris interview—but 5,600 miles away—in Hollywood, during a 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. sunrise shift at a recording complex. By the time our crew wrapped, Pharrell had engineers working in three different rooms.

The following week, when we reconnected yet again, in New York City, where Pharrell was promoting his new animated Lego biopic, *Piece by Piece,* as well as announcing his role as a co-chair for next year's Met Gala alongside Lewis Hamilton and Anna Wintour, I asked him about his multifaceted setup back in LA. "I had three different rooms for three different artists. That's the way I like to cook. I like to go from room to room, because one room reminds me that the other room isn't as hot as I thought it was before I left. Having different rooms going makes you zoom out. Because you zoom in to make it, but then you zoom out to judge whether it's fire."

When I expressed concern that he had flown from Paris to LA specifically to record music, only to have those recording sessions swamped by a *GQ* cover shoot, Louis Vuitton business, Lego movie business, and presumably the machinations of plenty of other projects I wasn't privy to, the 51-year-old simply blinked at me and responded: "That's the way that I like it."

What follows is an edited conversation with the planet's most prolific multitasker, and *GQ*'s Designer of the Year, about the ins and outs of what will one day inevitably be known as "The Pharrell Era" at Louis Vuitton—and "The LV Era" for Pharrell.

PHARRELL: Tell me when you're rolling.

GQ: Rolling.
We should start with joy. Joy is not only an experience and an emotion, but it's an art form. And it's the color I paint with.

Why are we starting there?
Well, [before we started rolling] you talked about our 2019 interview, and I don't ever read my interviews, but I'm pretty sure that I talked about my gratitude, and gratitude has brought me far in life. And the sense of joy that I feel is the next step up.

We talked a lot about humility last time too.
That's forever the exercise.

I like this idea that a life can be spent evolving through a focus on different emotions. So this is an era of exploration and discovery of joy for you?
Joy is a result. The exploration is just like humility, empathy, gratitude, chivalry. After living so much of my life one way—

Which was how?
Ambitious, but arrogant. Pompous at times.

Not a complete unbridled asshole, but cocky.
Yeah. Whereas what I've learned now is that when you err on the side of humility, empathy, gratitude, chivalry, you still—your talent is your talent. Your gift is your gift. So when you fuse all those things in it, that produces joy. My appointment here, it's so much bigger than apparel, footwear, bags, accessories, trunks—

Stuff.
—Campaigns, shows, windows. Man, I think about the shoes and bags that we are about to drop—bro, you will remember this conversation. It's so crazy. But it took the brand tapping me on my shoulder to say, "Hey, you're supposed to be in this position and this is what you're supposed to do." The appointment is not just here [at LV], it's an appointment to my life. In every situation that I encounter, my job is to produce joy.

I think people have a hard time accepting somebody as successful as you constantly articulating humility and gratitude. Always bowing.
I'm sure.

←←
OPENING PAGES
jacket and shirt
ERL

tank top, belt, sunglasses, and bag (throughout)
Louis Vuitton Men's

pants
Found

necklace (top, throughout) and bracelet (bottom, throughout)
Tiffany & Co.

necklaces (bottom), bracelet (top), earrings, and grills (throughout), his own

bag accessories (throughout)
ERL

THESE PAGES
vintage shirt
Wrangler

vintage jeans
Levi's

boots from
ERL Vintage Archive

hat and his own belt
Louis Vuitton Men's

socks and rings (throughout), his own

Because people are like—
Yeah, get the fuck out of here.

Easy for him to do with his millions...
But you know what? I could be the exact opposite.

I guess part of what you're saying is you once were, right? You tried the exact opposite.
It was the worst. It was the *worst.* It's *embarrassing.* When you really realize how this shit work? *You* didn't sell a million songs. You made a song and a million people liked it because a hundred people promoted it and the conditions were perfect for you. There's so many components to your success. You are one little part of it.

You might find it embarrassing, but a lot of people liked your flashy era. You were very good at it, very innovative. Now in your Vuitton era, you have dialed the flashiness back up without it being a contradiction to the humility and gratitude. How can you have it both ways?
Silence. Believe it or not, that's the difference.

I know you just said "silence," so forgive me, but this is an interview. I need you to say more.
Silence is an exercise. Allowing your work to speak for you is an exercise. Being okay with the fact that most people are going to miss it. Being extra okay with the fact that the people who don't miss it, who decide they want to act like it was their idea—they're going to get very loud about it, and they're going to get the credit for it. Until some of the real sleuths out there will be like, "Nah, here go the receipts." And you wait on that. But you stay in silence. Nigo-san, he taught me that. He don't say nothing. As Pusha says: If you know, you know.

← jacket, jumpsuit, t-shirt, and boots from **ERL Vintage Archive**

sunglasses **Ahlem**

→ jacket **Enfants Riches Déprimés**

his own shirt, jeans, and belt **Louis Vuitton Men's**

sneakers **ERL**

sunglasses **Selima Optique**

key chain, his own

Two years ago you founded an online auction platform called Joopiter. To launch it, you got all of your iconic custom jewelry—stuff from, let's call it your hubris era—out of storage and sold it. Was that stuff weighing on you?
I didn't realize. You never realize how much all the stuff you have weighs on you, but it does. You don't know it until you get rid of it. The muscles in my back, now they work without straining. When you let that go, man, you feel so free. It doesn't mean it doesn't exist in the world. It's still there. And whatever happens to them happens to them.

Right. In this case, Drake buys a bunch of it.
Sure.

How and when did you find out he was the buyer, and were you like, "Hmm, is this for—"
No, because I think beyond all of the on-goings, at the heart of all of it, he's a fan of music. He's a fan of the history of what it is, and I happen to be a part of that, and those artifacts are a part of it.

So when you found out he bought them, you were like, "Cool"?
Yeah.

And then when he was rapping about melting the jewelry down and saying, "Come get his legacy out my house" and all that stuff, how did that strike you?
It didn't.

That didn't strike you?
No.

It's interesting that these things are weighing on you, you get rid of them, somebody else takes them on, and what they mean to him—I guess that's for him to decide?
Or not. I guess some things are not for me to understand. When you let things go, a huge part of it is actually letting go. Not just of the physical item, but letting go of your connection to what it's supposed to mean, or the memory. You're literally letting them go. That was the purpose. It's like when people sell something and they go, "I just want to make sure you take care of it because this is my baby." And I'm like, "No, no, no." This is not my baby. That's why I'm letting it go.

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OK, let's talk LV. Best day on the job so far?
Every day.

Damn it. I knew you were going to say that.
I know, man. But listen, when you—

But there has to have been a particular day.... Because the next question is going to be "Most challenging day so far?" I'm trying to give people some texture of what it's like to be you in the LV era.
But what's the challenge, man? I'm from the mud, so what's the challenge?

Well, I didn't say the worst, most awful, terrible, horridly unacceptable day on the job.
Listen, can you see this? [*Walks over to an office window that looks over the Seine.*] Look.

Okay, I see the Seine.
Okay…

Oh. There's an encampment between us and the river.
Yeah, you see people who have a very different experience than we do. Who knows why they're there? Who knows what the situation is? I'm from the mud. We were in public housing. You can't ever say that public housing is like being homeless and living in the street. But you can say that the way that people live and what their resources are at the time is relative. I could be anywhere. The ideas that I have for [LV] trunks could just be ideas while I'm at my day job. You know what I'm saying?

It's definitely true that there are a lot of young people out there who are designing the next Louis Vuitton collection in their heads.
Who may or may not ever get that opportunity.

Yeah. Definitely may *not*.
And that's my point. So, how is every day not amazing? I know everything isn't awesome for everybody, but it can be if you were to retool and level set your appreciation. Level set your wherewithal. It can be amazing.

So, what was an example of a moment in the last 20 months where you lost that connection to your gratitude and got outside of yourself? And, I don't know, felt frustrated or stymied?
It's a big system, and sometimes you want it to move as quick as you ideate or iterate. And sometimes there's drag. But I'm blessed to be in a system where they listen, and we articulately explain why we think something is a drag and how it could be much more efficient. This is a system that listens. So there's moments where you got to exercise patience. And we do.

What's it like having a job at a corporation after so many years of total artistic independence?
Well, it's a house that happens to be machined by a corporation. It's not a job.

Why not?
Because I don't have a boss. It's a house. And I've been asked to come in and be the creative director. I mean, I love [Louis Vuitton CEO] Pietro [Beccari] and he appointed me, but he is not my boss.

And Bernard Arnault is not your boss either?
No. I'm in a house. It literally operates like a house. Obviously, it's his house. And they pay me very well. But no one's like, *You better do this* and *You need to do that.* It's like an artist in residence. So it's very different. I wouldn't have taken it if somebody thought they was my boss. I'm good. I am blessed.

So tell me a little bit about the nature of your conversations with Pietro Beccari. What happens when the two of you meet?
He's one of the best executives in the game because of a few things: He's good with strategy. He is an empowering supporter. And he has a spine. And people with a spine can stand next to you or stand behind you because they have vertebrae. And there's a lot of intersections where we agree. One is about efficiency. So when I tell him, Hey, we need *da-da-da-da* so I can be creative—so I can iterate and ideate and do what I got to do—he makes it happen.

And how does your working relationship with Bernard Arnault function?
Whenever we are together or we meet or we have a meal, we share our philosophies on the state of the business. We also talk about culture. He's very dialed in. You don't get to be a guy of his stature by not being dialed in to culture. He's dialed in.

Right, you can't build LVMH by staring at spreadsheets.
By *only* staring at spreadsheets, because he does that too. His eyes are 3D. One is looking at spreadsheets and the other one is looking at culture. And when he blends them together, he gets this three-dimensional understanding of how the world is working and how it's going to work. And we do that too: We have precognitive conversations.

jumpsuit, t-shirt, and boots from **ERL Vintage Archive**
sunglasses **Ahlem**

jacket and pants
Vivienne Westwood
shirt and hat
Louis Vuitton Men's
vest, belt buckle and gloves from
ERL Vintage Archive

What do you mean by that?
We talk about the future. Where we see it going. And we have several aspects of his businesses that are very close to his heart, and he has asked me to lean in to them. And so you'll see some really interesting Moët things pop up. [*Tugs on gold necklace.*] I did this with Tiffany.

Okay, so you're here at LV, this is your residency, but there's another house across the street you can wander over to as well?
Yeah. It's: What do you want to do? Can you lean in to this? Can you lean in to that? And we do. And then there's philanthropic things that we've been working on. For them, it's philanthropy. For me, I call it tithing. It's just giving back to the universe.

▪ ▪ ▪

In my role I get to spend a lot of time in Paris, but I've never moved over here for 20 months. You moved your family here. What are you learning?
French, a little bit at a time. And being here, looking across the pond, I just see how we rile each other up. I see how we're so tribalist. You know how condensation will show iridescence in your fingerprints, depending on how the light hits it? You can see the fingerprints of foreign agents and foreign countries pitting us against each other. You can see the fingerprints from here.

Because of the distance?
Because of the distance. And that's something that is hard to watch, but you don't want to be in it because you would be one of them, choosing a side. And then there's the people in the middle of it who have a salacious hunger to feed their bias. And so they do whatever it takes to get you to try to choose a side. If you don't, you're the enemy. And when you choose a side, everybody [on that side is] with you. And then the other group of people who differ in opinion hate you. And it's like, Yo, what do y'all think those stars on the flag are about? You think every state is alike? You crazy?

Yeah. It's not just a blue square.
Thank God Hawaii is not like Iowa, and Iowa is not like Illinois. New Mexico is nothing like Atlanta, Georgia. Thank God! That's what makes us beautiful. And how did we become the United States of America? Put aside for a second, the original sin—the first commodity in the country, which were Black people. Let's put that to the side. How do we become that whole idea that was marketed to us, that this was the land of the free and the home of the brave, and that all these different nations from around the world, mostly Europe, would come over there and set up shop and create this new world, right? What happened to that?

Yeah. It's supposed to be the *United* States.
And we're the furthest from it right now. All of that is hard to watch, man. And for me, listen, I don't think you're supposed to agree with everything. But you need to appreciate the differences because you are different from somebody else, too. And that's what we have completely lost sight of. This is how I know the glaze is over our eyes back home: When I hear these talks of anti-immigration and "They're coming into our country and they're bringing diseases, they're raping, they're killing, they're bringing drugs, they're taking our jobs"—you could take the words from some of these speeches and just show Native Americans and put these speeches with them. They were there first. They would

have the right to be the ones to say that. And so when you think about these people that are wanting you to take a side on certain things, it's like, Man, I am sorry, but I am not with any kind of division. To me, we are all God's children. And if the Lord love everybody—

Who are we to hate?
I'm not with the divisiveness. You know there's the word *sword.* You move that *s* to the back, and it's *words.* I choose words. I wish there could be no loss of life, and people could discuss their differences. But I also know that the world doesn't work that way. And again, that's the reason why I say to certain questions, like, Man, don't ask me, because I'm a celebrity, what I think about this or what I think about that. I'm of no authority. Don't ask me.

You took a similar stance in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* that was published soon after Taylor Swift endorsed Kamala Harris. And the headlines became that you dissed Taylor.
Because that's what they do. They pit you against each other. I love Taylor. She knows that.

To be clear, in the interview you did not say her name.
No. Zero. In fact, I bought a *1989* Taylor T-shirt online last year, and I was walking around here with it tucked into my jeans. I love her. I love people, bro. That was some right-wing troll shit. But I heard something the other day that made the most sense in the world: Right-wing, left-wing, all the same bird.

So if you reject the binary, where do you stand?
Well, I'm so glad you asked, because, for me, just because you offer me the options doesn't mean that I need to exist in that.

"I reject your menu."
Yeah, I reject your menu. And I reserve the right. I actually do stand for something, of course, but I don't have to share it with you. Who are you that I need to report to you what I feel? What if I don't like either of your choices? What if I love people? What if I'm not a war person, I'm not a fighter? The cliché thing would be to say I'm a lover—and shit, I guess that it is what we did here [at Louis Vuitton], right?

Well, there's good clichés and bad clichés.
Right. But my thing is like, I don't have to share my discourse with you. I stand for my ability to remain silent. I'm all about action. I've donated, I've volunteered, but I don't need to show you and I don't have to tell you. It's anonymous because I don't care what you think. I care what my god thinks. I worship the god of Abraham, which is the same god of the three considered monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I'm also a universalist, so my Buddhist siblings? All good. For me, there's room under the sun for everyone. My Hindu siblings? Yo, same thing. And any other theology that recognizes the all that is, all that ever was, and all that ever will be. You call it whatever you want. I don't got to get in the comments. You do that. You stay there, and you live your life there, wake up one day addicted to eating couch filler. It's fine with me. By the way, if I wasn't like that, then I couldn't preach *Live and let live.* You know what I'm saying? You can't have it both ways. You either really down with *Live and let live* or you not. And if you are down with *Live and let live,* then you really got to live and let live.

Even when it's uncomfortable.
Absolutely. In my mind—not in anybody else's opinion, but in my mind—I'm like a merited civil servant. Meaning it doesn't matter who's in the White House, we got things we got to get done for our country. I might not like your politics, but that's what being American is supposed to be about. Right? You got to be able to work with "your side" and "the other side." If there's things that I need to get done for Virginia that's going to benefit Virginians, I'm willing to have a conversation with whoever the powers that be is going to be.

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Let's talk about your year at LV. What was the first spark that ultimately led you to create the Cowboy collection?
It was two things: One, my dad loves Westerns. And I never really understood it, because he says shit sometimes, and I'm like, "Dad, you can't say that." He's from a different era. He was shot in his back and called the N-word, so that stuck with him. But certain times he says things where I'm like, "Dad, come on." You know what I mean? He's a boomer, so boomers…

Boomers boom.
Yeah, sometimes boomers boom. But he loves Westerns, and I'm like, "Dad, you do know that's not how it was? They're missing Black, Asian, and other folks that were doing a lot of the work, and the way that they're treating the natives is terrible. How do you like this?" He likes a lot of the actors who, in real life, how they regarded Black people was terrible. And he knows that. But he still just likes the art form. And also, I just love Chanel "Paris-Dallas." [In 2013, Karl Lagerfeld staged a Chanel runway show in Dallas.] So the collection was kind of like an homage to two people that I looked up to. That's why I called it the "Paris-Virginia" collection.

Your other big Louis Vuitton show this year was the UNESCO show, which was just a few weeks before the Olympics arrived in Paris. First you gave us cowboys, then you gave us the fashion version of "We Are the World."
Wow. Thank you.

To be honest, I had a really complex experience sitting at that show. As the models started coming out, I was like, the clothes are very dark and so is the skin tone of the

(continued on page 159)

←
jacket, pants, and sunglasses **Louis Vuitton Men's**

t-shirt and belt **ERL**

→
jacket, turtleneck, and pants **Maison Margiela**

boots and pin from **ERL Vintage Archive**

sunglasses **Ahlem**

skin by irene grosleib. barbering by johnny cake castellanos. tailoring by yelena travkina. set design by james rene. produced by tightrope production.

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

FUTURE & METRO BOOMIN'S HISTORIC STREAK

What happens when the best rapper alive reunites with the hottest producer of the moment? You get a back-to-back-to-back run unlike any since the Beatles.

By **Frazier Tharpe** | Photographs by **Eli Russell Linnetz**

Styled by **Mobolaji Dawodu**

a gray afternoon in the two-story penthouse of a casually luxurious Parisian hotel, two Benz Sprinters' worth of entourage members are sitting around waiting for Future to emerge. It's Paris Fashion Week, and the Atlanta rapper has a front-row seat waiting for him at Balenciaga's summer 2025 runway show, which we technically should already be en route to—but nailing the fit is a process that can't be rushed.

When he does emerge, he's in head-to-toe Balenci, and the first thing he does is troll us. VIPs attending the Balenciaga show were sent a plain-but-dazzling gold band, like a wedding ring, as part of the invite; today Future flashes his and announces, "I just got married," in his trademark just-woke-up croak.

To the game? I reply.

For a moment, Future (who's still a bachelor) seems thrown off, as if he'd expected me to fall for the bait instead of volleying back with a reference to one of his most revered songs—and then he bursts into an approving laugh, blond locs thrown back, teeth bared wide enough to show the grills on his molars. Moments later, in the elevator, shades on and hood up, he repeats the line to himself, this time with an addendum. "Married to the game…story of my life," he mutters, before looking up at everyone around him. "Just renewed my vows!"

Hours after the show, in the private back room of the cavernous Champs-Élysées-adjacent restaurant Verde, Future is in high spirits. Seated at the center of a *Last Supper*–long table surrounded by close friends and longtime collaborators, he's lobbing joke after joke: remarking how much attention from the fairer sex his ring is attracting, chastising his homie for bringing around women who were less wifey and more "tutes" (as in *prostitute*), reflecting on the Balenciaga looks, and reminiscing about the Parisian woman he spotted earlier who was so bad he'd have willingly shared his phone passcode with her.

Soon, though, a lull falls over the table—the plates have been scraped, the drinks drained, the chitchat briefly exhausted. The allure of Future's ongoing Eurotrip—Paris for several days, Milan before that—seems to have worn off, and after two weeks of fun, fashion, and *femmes* abroad, he's ready to go home. More specifically, he's ready to go back to work. "Man, I can't wait to get back in the studio," he says, longingly, to no one in particular, albeit in the general direction of Wheezy and Taurus, two of his go-to producers, who are seated across the table. "I'm fienin' to lay even just an ad-lib or somethin', soon as we touch down!"

How long has it been since y'all recorded anything? I ask Taurus, expecting to hear that Future had taken the summer off or something.

"About two weeks," Taurus replies matter-of-factly.

This may sound insane, but within the greater cosmos surrounding the rapper whose favored moniker is Pluto, it's business as usual. Consider the date, September 30: Ten days earlier, Future released *Mixtape Pluto,* a no-frills collection of new songs that, as the title suggests, aimed to recapture the vibe of his earlier less commercial music. (The reviews and fan response would indicate he mostly succeeded.) Consider the previous six months: *Mixtape Pluto,* which brought his total 2024 output up to a whopping 59 songs, was his third number one album in just half a year, a feat no solo artist (read: no one who was not the Beatles circa 1965–66 or the cast of *Glee* in 2010) has pulled off since *Billboard* started publishing a weekly albums chart in 1956. It extends a remarkable run that began with this past spring's *We Don't Trust You* and *We Still Don't Trust You,* twin albums that reunited Future with the St. Louis–born, Atlanta-adopted beatmaker Metro Boomin, who's been working with Future since before he could have a legal drink.

Their careers have been on parallel tracks for the past 10-plus years; Metro's paradigm-shifting beats helped spark Future's creativity as he evolved into one of hip-hop's most prolific and inventive contemporary artists, hitching narcotic, increasingly experimental flows to hyper-specific tales of street life and romantic woe. Although *We Don't Trust You* marked the formal end of an informal near hiatus in collaboration, with the two having released only a handful of tracks together in the past seven years, they've remained closely associated in the public consciousness.

↓
THIS PAGE
jeans
Balenciaga Couture
hat (throughout)
Stetson
boots (throughout)
Back at the Ranch
watch
Jaeger-LeCoultre
his own bracelets (on left wrist, throughout)
Cartier
ring (on pinkie)
David Yurman
tank top and sunglasses, his own
earrings, nose rings, necklace, bracelet (on right wrist), and ring (on ring finger) (throughout), his own

←←
OPENING PAGES
ON METRO BOOMIN
vest
Vereda New York
shirt
Ernest W. Baker
pants
Giorgio Armani
bolo tie and belt (throughout)
Clint Orms Engravers & Silversmiths
boots (throughout)
Back at the Ranch
hat (throughout)
Stetson
watch
Omega
earrings and nose ring (throughout), his own
bracelet, his own
ring
David Yurman

ON FUTURE
jacket
Giorgio Armani
turtleneck
Giuliva Heritage
jeans
Levi's
sunglasses, his own
watch
Jaeger-LeCoultre
ring (on pinkie)
David Yurman

→
THIS PAGE
ON METRO BOOMIN
vintage jacket and jeans
Wrangler
shirt
Ernest W. Baker

ON FUTURE
jacket
Bode
shirt
Brunello Cucinelli
jeans
Levi's
belt
Clint Orms Engravers & Silversmiths
sunglasses
Ahlem
ring (on pinkie)
David Yurman

Over the past few years, Metro has also leveled up, from trap hitmaker to full-fledged superproducer; the mere announcement that he and Future were working together again made *We Don't Trust You* a major event release in a somewhat excitement-starved moment for hip-hop. (As it turned out, the album ended up creating even more excitement than they'd anticipated; more on that later.)

You would think releasing over three hours' worth of acclaimed music in a six-month span would be enough to leave any artist's tank depleted, at least for a spell, but as his last night in Paris winds down, Future is already planning his next re-up, looking directly at Wheezy and throwing down a friendly gauntlet: "I need some inspiration!"

"HE'S IN THERE every day, bro," Metro Boomin says, nodding all too knowingly. "It could be Christmas—he's in the studio."

It's a rainy afternoon in Miami, the weather heralding the coming of Hurricane Milton, and Metro—who admits he's only slightly less work-addicted than his big homie—is enjoying some rare time off. He's fresh from a vacation in Japan, where he tinkered with some beats without the pressure of a deadline. His mild-mannered demeanor is the stark opposite of his typically hard-hitting beats, although as we reflected on his past year, he was quick to admit there were times when he lost his trademark cool.

ON METRO BOOMIN
jacket
Dior Men

shirt
Dzojchen

ON FUTURE
jacket
Dior Men
scarf (throughout)
Charvet
sunglasses
Jacques Marie Mage

Metro is an obsessive WWE fan; when we talked, he'd just attended the WWE's Bad Blood event in Atlanta two nights prior. "I love good storytelling," he gushes. "It's not just about n-ggas hitting each other with chairs.... The most important part to me is the storytelling and the emotion, and making you believe what's going on." And when the conversation turned to the events of 2024, he put it in wrestling terms: "So, yeah, there was a moment from earlier this year that was like my heel turn. When the babyface turns bad."

Before we get to what turned Metro, though, we have to start with the musical reunion that got him there: one of the best rappers of the past decade, locking back in with the producer who helped him earn that standing. Fan expectations were high; Future's and Metro's expectations were even higher.

Future, like most rappers, has a cadre of producers he works well with, but when he's with Metro, there's a noticeably different energy to his work. "When we're both in the room," Metro muses, "I feel like there's an extra effort he puts into it. I feel like he tries to show out.

"I feel like [our relationship] is healthy because we push each other. I'm not [the type of] producer that's just going to sit in the studio and be happy he's using my beat. I wasn't even like that then. I'll be like, 'Yo, you can do that verse again.'"

The "then" in question refers to a period in their careers over 10 years ago, when Metro was still in high school, diligently sending beats to the South's hottest rappers, and Future was quickly rising to the top of that crop on the strength of his mixtape performances. "This guy named Propane who used to manage me, he used to work with Future," Metro recalls. "Then Future dropped *Dirty Sprite* and it blew my mind. So I just started sending Propane beats for Future. And then when I was still in 12th grade, he finally ended up getting on one called 'Hard.'"

That led to Metro sending Future more beats, and eventually to Metro signing with Future's Freebandz label. Given Future's rising status, that hardly guaranteed Metro an automatic slot in the rotation. But his work ethic and attention to detail helped him stand out amid a murderer's row of rising producers.

"You have all these great producers coming in all the time—Mike WiLL, Zaytoven, Will A Fool. Everybody who made beats in Atlanta was in Future's studio trying to get him beats," Metro says. "So I would always be the one in the back of the room just waiting until it's my time to get mine in. I'd be like the first one there, last one to leave, every day." While Future maintains a rapport with all of those producers—and others, like the aforementioned Wheezy and Taurus—there's only one producer he's vowed to kill for on wax.

Their partnership took the next step in the wake of Future's second studio album, *Honest,* which found the rapper lightly polishing his image and getting a little more experimental, only to be met with a lukewarm response from critics and, most importantly, his core audience, all around the time his engagement to Ciara was falling apart in the public eye. As Future retreated to the studio to regroup, Metro stepped up to shoulder the responsibility of getting the music back on track.

"I was like 19," Metro recalls. "I had just dropped out of Morehouse. I came to him in the studio one day like, 'You should let me executive-produce this [next] mixtape. You think I'm bullshitting. Let me do it.' He said, 'All right, I'm going to let you do it this one time, but if this don't work, don't ever ask again.' And the rest is history."

IT'S 3 A.M. in Miami and the streets are desolate—hardly the norm in the wee hours of a weeknight for a typically 24/7 city. The looming hurricane appears to have scared everyone inside, or out of state; Future likens

the vibe to the early days of COVID. We're in the studio, Future's headquarters, with his right-hand man 2Fly, his engineer Eric, Wheezy, and two women passing their own joints back and forth. Bowls of candy, empty McDonald's bags, and a vase full of roses adorn the two tables; the mood lighting is dark and pink, like the gleaming image of the Dungeon Family house that adorns *Mixtape Pluto*'s cover. Future has been awake for barely two hours.

It's been a week since we last met in Paris, and the music playing in the background would suggest he and Wheezy found the inspiration they were looking for. Along with some new music Future has been working on with Lil Baby—whose can't-miss red Cybertruck was parked in the lot outside the studio—tonight's soundtrack includes a smooth cut with the refrain "Last night in Paris…," which reinforces what his collaborators and Future himself all say about why his music resonates so deeply. He is, maybe more than any other mainstream rapper, rapping about his day-to-day life, however depraved, fly, luxurious, or depressing that might sound on any given bar. The lyric "Lost my dog to fentanyl"? Yup—he got the call and poured raw pain onto the track. The song "South of France"? He and Wheezy were on a superyacht that, from the way they describe it, wouldn't have been out of place on *Succession* when they made the reflective tune about how far they've come.

Tonight, though, he isn't recording anything. When he interacts with Eric the engineer, it's mostly to hilariously roast him for relaying baseless hurricane facts. Future is the type to tee up a joke, then stare around the room right as it lands, soaking in the reactions like a class clown—when he's not delivering impassioned speeches about any number of topics, in what his team jokingly refers to as "Pastor Pluto" mode. ("I need some new friends, all of y'all burnt out," he wisecracks while rolling a blunt, in reaction to the relatively low energy in the room.) But one gets the sense that even if nothing productive happens during this session, there's no place he'd rather be. He may not have anywhere else *to* be—the distinction seems both enormous and irrelevant.

This type of persistence, dedication, and genuine love for the craft is how you get 11 number one albums. But as consistent as he's remained over the course of his career, it feels like he's in the midst of a new creative run, dating back to 2022's *I Never Liked You,* which marked a return to form after the perfectly fine but dare I say rote efforts that preceded it, *High Off Life* (2020) and *The Wizrd* (2019).

"I'm back to making music like I was at the beginning of my career, doing it with the people I love," Future says. "When I started doing music, I'd go into the studio every day, like how we doing now. We just loved being in the studio, instead of *chasing it*—going out to this person, working with different producers, trying to do the A&R, listening to them. I don't want to do that. I want to just make it how I came in the game. I already got everything. Now, it's time to live and just make music. Now, I'm making better music. I got the hard part out of the way. Set my kids up, set up my mama and my sisters and shit, make sure they were covered. Now, I can have fun with this shit again. I don't even have to worry about the money."

The hard part he's alluding to? Figuring out how to get real wealth in this industry. Back in 2022 it was reported that Future sold the publishing rights to his recorded output from 2004 to 2020 to the investment firm Influence Media Partners for an eight-figure sum. Future doesn't dispute this, but says people have misinterpreted what it means about his financial picture, and bemoans the fact that his windfall made news in the first place. "People don't understand because I didn't feel like going

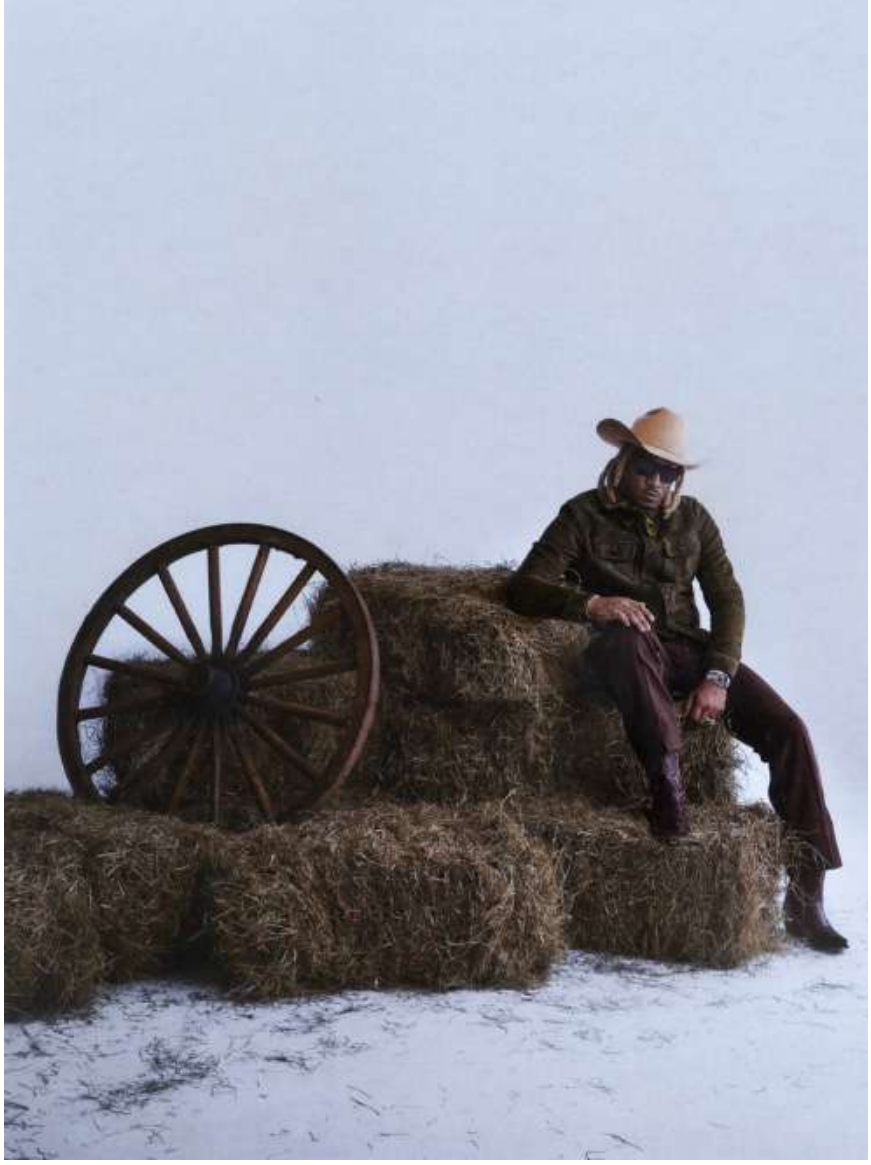
← LEFT
ON METRO BOOMIN
suit
Hermès
shirt
Bode
gloves
Hestra
bandana (throughout), stylist's own
sunglasses and necklace (throughout), his own

↑ TOP
ON FUTURE
jacket and shirt
Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello
bolo tie
Chrome Hearts
sunglasses
Ahlem

into details, telling them my business," he says. "Because you know I got baby mamas, this, this, and this person. I'm like, *How they even know, goddamn? They wasn't even supposed to print this shit.* So now they thinking, *Goddamn, a n-gga a billionaire.*"

Future says the deal opened his eyes to what he could really get out of this business in the long run by maintaining his quality, with a whole lot of quantity. He says he's now got his eyes set on reaching half a billion; he estimates that if he'd known at the beginning of his career what he knows now about ownership and equity, he would be a billionaire already.

"When I turn 45, I'm going after my paper," Future says, leaning back in his chair and exhaling a puff of smoke. "Because I don't have to get nothing right now. The process of selling, it's going to take two years. So it's like, I can start that process when I'm 43. And by the time I'm 45, I can do some *shit*, bruh."



FOR NOW HE'S nearly 41, dropping event albums in his 14th year in the game—and according to Metro, still so unafraid to try anything that he needs a little steering from time to time. "Future's one of the easiest people to work with. You got to understand, he comes from that Dungeon Family era from when artists were really *produced,*" Metro says, citing the legendary Atlanta collective spearheaded by Future's late cousin Rico Wade in the early '90s, which birthed ATL legends from OutKast to Goodie Mob before inviting in Future himself. "He wants to be led in a direction. And him being so receptive to that, even from when I was way younger, it's always given me the confidence to keep coming harder. To be like, 'Yo, I think we should try this. I think we should do a song about this. Or maybe just scratch all that. Maybe you need to just go back in the booth and try something again.'"

As an album artist, Future's at his best when someone else helps curate his output. Without someone like Metro in the room—or other key collaborators like his longtime engineer Seth Firkins, who died suddenly back in 2017 at the age of 36—you get a less rigorous selection of material, and solid but not classic-level albums like *The Wizrd* or *High Off Life*.

Metro chalks up their sabbatical from each other to "regular brother shit. It wasn't like no crazy conflict," he explains. "Like, how you'll be into it with your brother over some minor shit but still cool whenever we see each other. And I was also doing different things: DJ'ing more, doing this and that." He was also expanding his palette, building similar musical bonds with rappers like 21 Savage and producing for other artists, like James Blake and The Weeknd.

"I like the fact he takes his time," Future says of working with Metro. "Because I'm random. I'm just more spontaneous. He's more detailed. And working with him taught me to be more detailed too. It helped me with my patience. I learned how to still be spontaneous but also have details too."

Their reunion this year lived up to the hype and their own expectations: two full-length albums that should be Top 10 mainstays on any respectable year-end list. And, yes, one song in particular—"Like That," featuring a titanic, muscular "Everlasting Bass" sample flip from Metro and an especially unhinged verse from Future (do not listen closely if you don't want to hear specifics of the X-rated scenario that may cost him a stone from one of his 20-carat rings)—became the inciting incident for a full-scale war, the rap-world equivalent of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Metro is eager to finally say his piece and set the record straight, after months of relative radio silence.

"Like That" originated as a song for Metro's 2022 album. He'd envisioned it as a posse cut with multiple rappers flowing over the beat. But at some point, he sent it to Kendrick Lamar, who he'd already been talking to for a feature on *Heroes & Villains* that didn't end up coming together. Listening to what Kendrick sent back was an "Oh fuck" moment Metro still remembers clearly, so much so that he kept the verse super close to the vest.

We all know what happened next: "Like That" kicked a long-simmering cold war between Kendrick and Drake

jacket
Ralph Lauren Purple Label
jeans
Wrangler
watch
Rolex
bracelet (on right wrist, bottom) and ring (on pinkie)
David Yurman
sunglasses, his own

into high gear. Future and Drake are longtime collaborators whose 2015 mixtape *What a Time to Be Alive* was executive-produced by Metro. But "Like That"—and the appearances, across the two albums, from other artists who've seemingly had their own issues with Drake, like The Weeknd and A$AP Rocky—led many to assume they'd fallen out. There were also rumors of static between Drake and Metro. The whole scenario made Metro—to borrow a reference from the Spider-Man comics he's a noted fan of—look like the orchestrator of a Sinister Six team bent on what Kanye would later characterize in an interview as "the elimination of Drake." "I seen that video on my phone and I was like, *Noooo*," Metro laughs, before clarifying that it's all good with an on-record "shout-out to Ye."

Kanye's antics aside, when I ask Metro if he's formally rejecting the idea that this was all a detailed attack plan, he responds with an emphatic "for sure"—even though some rap fans still see him as some kind of diabolical chess master. "People really think we sat for two years, making two albums [to be] like, *Yo, fuck this dude*. What kind of shit is that? You really think we are going to spend that much time, effort, resources on just trying to get at somebody on an album? Blowing budgets on two albums—going *over* budget? That's some serious hate. Neither one of us rock like that."

"Me and [Drake]," Metro explains, "we had a personal issue, and for the record, not over no girl or nothing silly like that. It was a personal issue that really hurt me and disappointed me. But if you take all the rap entertainment out of it, it's like, have you ever been real cool with somebody, and y'all fell out over something? It happens every day. It's just regular shit. This just happens to have an audience."

"Now I did have my moment online, which I do regret," Metro admits, referring to an anti-Drake tweet spree that he went on in response to Drake's diss tracks, which carved out scathing bars for Metro specifically amid all the other artists Drake was beefing with. "I should have been stronger than that. That was out of character for me. But at a certain point, it's like, *I don't rap, bro, so you're going to just shit on me on all of these songs.... I'm not going to get in the booth, so I'm finna tweet at you.*"

More than anything, Metro is annoyed by the idea that the spectacle of a Drake diss was the reason *We Don't Trust You* became the event that it became. "Like That" was always going to be the "centerpiece" of the first album on the strength of Metro's beat and Future's bars (Metro says there's an unheard eight-bar Future verse that's equally crazy, but he removed it once Kendrick joined), even back when his and Future's linking back up was all the hype they really needed. "If you even think about where the game was before we dropped them albums, the year before that, people were like there hasn't been a hip-hop number one album, hip-hop's going out of style. We breathed some fresh air in the game, and then it just spiraled and turned into some other shit."

For Metro, it was in the rearview after he got the tweets out of his system, and turned his frustration into another viral hit—an instrumental seemingly earmarked for anyone else looking to make a Drake-baiting diss song of their own. "Once I uploaded the 'BBL Drizzy' beat I was done," he says. "If I could go back, I wish I didn't tweet and just put the beat up like, *Okay, this is my whole response.*"

Future, it's worth noting, has never overtly dissed Drake, although this hasn't stopped fans from reading implications into certain lines from the two *Trust You* albums. When I ask him, in Miami, about his perspective on the beef, it seems like he's about to give one of his patented evasive interview maneuvers. "There was a beef?" he asks, impishly smirking as he stands up to roll another joint. "I didn't even know there was a beef. I didn't even know they had nothing going on. I ain't never participated in *rap battles,* man." The implication behind distinguishing beef and battles is clear—beef is, like Biggie once rapped, when an issue has real street consequences. After a few moments, though, he acquiesces—but poses a question back to me: Why should he care about the beef, when no one involved seemed to care about him?

"He said 'Big Three' on *my* song," Future cracks, referring to the infamous Kendrick bar disputing J. Cole's assertion that he, Drake, and Kendrick constitute rap's current holy trinity. In asserting that *(continued on page 155)*

← LEFT
ON FUTURE
jacket
Bode
shirt
Brunello Cucinelli
vintage jeans
Levi's
sunglasses
Ahlem

↑ TOP
ON METRO BOOMIN
jacket
McQueen by Seán McGirr
shirt
Brunello Cucinelli
vintage jeans
Levi's
watch and bracelet, his own
ring
Mr. Lowe by Sheryl Lowe

ON METRO BOOMIN
coat and turtleneck
Dunhill
jeans
Levi's

ON FUTURE
coat
Gucci
sweater
Ralph Lauren Purple Label
pants
Brioni
watch
Rolex
bracelet (on right wrist, bottom)
David Yurman
ring (on pinkie)
John Hardy

for future: hair by lynn jadotte; barbering by ian owens; skin by gianluca mandelli. for metro boomin: grooming by chelsea cotton. tailoring by soraya susi. set design by rochelle bennett. produced by tightrope production.

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

THE 2024 GQ FASHION AWARDS

It was a huge year for fashion romantics, elegant clothes, exposed navels, and viral tomatoes. Without further ado, the winners are...

Rick Owens's fall '24 men's show, here and below, was an unforgettable spectacle.

SHOW OF THE YEAR

RICK OWENS'S HOLLYWOOD

IN JANUARY, citing our "barbaric times," Rick Owens moved his runway show into his Paris town house. Guests sat on his furniture and drank coffee while models lurched through his living room in the fall '24 collection. Unlike most hard-core Rick Owens productions, this one was warm, cozy even—if you were lucky enough to nab one of the 100 or so invites. Owens felt guilty that he couldn't include the black-clad cult that treats his shows like national holidays. "I felt kind of like a dick about that," he said six months later. So for spring '25, he said, "I thought, well, we'll just put them all in the show!" In June, 200 fans, fashion students, and a handful of runway regulars (plus a 13-person "gymnast bouquet"—look it up) marched around the Art Deco Palais de Tokyo like representatives from the Rick Owens republic in a Cecil B. DeMille–directed Olympics opening ceremony. Owens called the show Hollywood, a tribute to the place where he invented himself as a young Californian. It was an I-was-there moment in Paris, one that will go down in fashion history as an unforgettable testament to Owens's radical independent vision—and a poignant appeal for humanity in fashion. —SAMUEL HINE

SHOW OF THE YEAR: COURTESY OF RICK OWENS (2). LOOK OF THE YEAR: COURTESY OF SAINT LAURENT.

LOOK OF THE YEAR

SAINT LAURENT

FALL '24 LOOK NO. 34

SHIRT: Semi-sheer, double-layer buttoned silk shirt, with a high, pointed collar and French cuffs.

TIE: Wide, tapered tie in tonal grosgrain.

PANTS: High-waist pants in matching silk fabric, featuring an unlined, relaxed leg with a single pleat.

JACKET: Double-breasted six-button jacket with georgette silk in a '90s cut, fully unstructured beneath a wide shoulder pad.

SHOES: Vaccarello's first square-toe shoe design in smooth leather with a stacked heel.

SAINT LAURENT creative director Anthony Vaccarello's tribute to the label's namesake was a sublime collection of flowing tailored looks, like this one, in surprising color combinations cut from elegant silk. To make the suits drape and wrap around the body, Vaccarello crafted them with dressmaking—rather than tailoring—techniques, cleverly infusing the ultimate masculine garment with echoes of Yves Saint Laurent's iconic work.

"Men's wardrobes are ultimately very standardized," Vaccarello told *GQ*. "I wanted to play with these archetypes and the fantasy of the man going to work, while having fun with the proportion. The tie is a bit wider, the jacket a little longer, the shoes are a bit too square." —S.H.

COLLABORATION OF THE YEAR

TYLER, THE CREATOR X LOUIS VUITTON

FROM THE moment he exploded onto the scene in the early 2010s, Tyler, the Creator has possessed one of the most prodigiously dialed aesthetics in popular culture—a pastel-splashed, prep-forward, unabashedly *fun* vision that he's used to power his own brands, Golf Wang and Golf Le Fleur, alongside an ever-expanding roster of partnerships with the likes of Levi's, Converse, and Globe-Trotter. This spring, though, Louis Vuitton men's creative director Pharrell Williams granted Tyler his grandest stage yet as a designer: a full-scale LV capsule collection, for which the Odd Future founder was able to harness the full force of the house's superlative craftsmanship to bring his singular personal style to life in its most opulent form. The resulting line—which included everything from quilted jackets and trucker hats to golf bags and chess sets—was a global smash hit, signaling that Vuitton might just have a successor ready if Skateboard P ever decides to roll on. —YANG-YI GOH

Looks from Tyler, the Creator's collab with Louis Vuitton.

STORE OF THE YEAR

STÒFFA

FOR A DECADE NOW, Stòffa has been one of the most tastefully locked-in brands in menswear, doling out a tight edit of drapey, dusty-toned garments every season that all flow together seamlessly. It's no surprise, then, that the New York label's new 2,000-square-foot SoHo flagship feels every bit as considered and zen-like as its clothing. The gallery-style front room houses a small selection of ready-to-wear hanging amid arresting vintage furnishings, while the rear space—reserved for made-to-measure appointments—is dominated by an astonishing skylight that casts a soothing glow on the handcrafted ash wood fixtures. It all makes for about as elevated and civilized a shopping experience as you're likely to encounter. —Y.G.

At the new Stòffa space, shop off the rack or make an appointment for a made-to-measure experience.

COLLABORATION OF THE YEAR. FROM LEFT: GETTY; COURTESY OF LOUIS VUITTON/BFA (2); COURTESY OF LOUIS VUITTON. STORE OF THE YEAR: COURTESY OF STÒFFA (2). TREND OF THE YEAR. FROM LEFT: DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES FOR NETFLIX; MERT ALAS/COURTESY OF CALVIN KLEIN; KATJA OGRIN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES; GOTHAM/GC IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; THEIMAGEDIRECT.COM. SNEAKER OF THE YEAR: COURTESY OF BODE.

TREND OF THE YEAR

MALE SLUTTINESS

The boys of the sluttiness mindset (from left): Colman Domingo, Jeremy Allen White, Troye Sivan, Donald Glover, and Shawn Mendes.

IT'S NOT JUST that the fellas showed a lot of skin this year—though, yes, that did happen, with thigh-baring short shorts and midsection-exposing crop tops running rampant all summer long. The sluttiness we're referring to, however, is more of a mindset than a literal state of undress. It's Jeremy Allen White carrying a gigantic bouquet of flowers home from the farmers market in a rumpled shirt and baggy jeans. It's Jacob Elordi slipping a paperback into his cargo pocket. It's Donald Glover doing, well, pretty much anything. There's a knowing energy these guys put out, a vibe implicit in both their clothes and disposition that says, "I know you've noticed this subtle but sensual thing I'm doing, and I'm unbothered by your gaze." And being unbothered under scrutiny? That's the sluttiest thing a man can do. —Y.G.

SNEAKER OF THE YEAR

BODE X NIKE ASTROGRABBER

WHEN BODE unveiled the Nike Astrograbber in April—the American luxury brand's first major collaboration—sneaker fever was officially back. It had felt like years since a footwear collab made much noise at all—oversaturation led to a fallow stretch of big athletic brands recycling familiar vintage silhouettes. But then, Emily Adams Bode Aujla dove into the obscure corners of Swoosh history, discovering the '70s turf football model deep in the Beaverton archives. The sneaker, she said, was "definitely not popular." But by the time Bode Aujla updated the shape and laced each pair with whimsical charms, the Astrograbber looked brand-new, becoming a celebrity-street-style favorite at warp speed and selling out even faster. —S.H.

WATCH OF THE YEAR

ALL THINGS PIAGET

IN FEBRUARY, Piaget kicked off its 150th anniversary by rereleasing the lavish Polo, a watch with so much gold it could easily double as a handsome paperweight. The Polo 79—to honor the year of the original's creation—launched a love affair between collectors and the brand's entire archive of opulent watches, whose dials are resplendent with gemstones like tiger's eye, lapis lazuli, and opal. Piaget met the moment in 2024, as the craze for sexy dress watches escalated and collectors looked for unique ways to express their individual tastes through a timepiece. What makes the Polo so exciting is that when it was originally released in 1979 it became Piaget's first named watch, meaning nearly every piece that came before it was a one-off custom masterpiece twinkling with its own idiosyncrasies. In 2024, that's exactly what watch buyers were after. —CAM WOLF

Zendaya, Loewe creative director Jonathan Anderson, and Josh O'Connor in the viral shirt of the year.

MEME MAKER OF THE YEAR

LOEWE

"THIS TOMATO IS SO Loewe I can't explain it," an X user named @homocowboi posted on June 3, above a photo of an unusually photogenic tomato. It racked up more than 97,000 likes and caught the eye of Loewe creative director Jonathan Anderson, who by June 6 had crafted the perfect response in the form of a clutch modeled after that avant-garde tomato. That was par for the course for Anderson, who arguably understands how to wield and manipulate internet culture to his advantage better than any designer alive. This year alone, he created the *Challengers* "I TOLD YA" shirt, perhaps the most viral movie merch since *Napoleon Dynamite*'s "Vote for Pedro" tee; transformed former 007 Daniel Craig into a shaggy-haired bohemian for a blockbuster Loewe campaign; and dressed Aubrey Plaza for the Emmys in a Post-It-note-esque gown that became instant meme fodder. Keep posting through it, Jonathan. —Y.G.

COMEBACK OF THE YEAR

ALESSANDRO MICHELE FOR VALENTINO

AFTER LEAVING GUCCI two years ago, Alessandro Michele receded from the fashion world. To work on a film, perhaps, or simply spend his days tending to his extensive antiques collection. Thankfully for us, the designer who mainstreamed genderfluid, maximalist menswear made his triumphant return in September at the helm of Valentino, where he presented a passionate argument for the importance of frivolity with polka-dot dinner jackets, languid trousers, and precise column coats tailored from sumptuous needlepoint. They were clothes that don't have all that much to do with how we live today, connected more to Valentino Garavani's archive and the bygone golden age of Italian style. But that was the genius of Michele's return: While he was out of the game, men's fashion began to emphasize understated practicality and comfort. Michele came back to remind us that beautiful, intriguingly embellished garments have their own special utility. As he put it following the show: "If you have a good relationship with clothes, you can really glorify life." —S.H.

Alessandro Michele's debut Valentino collection: both elegant and gloriously frivolous.

WATCH OF THE YEAR: COURTESY OF PIAGET. MEME MAKER OF THE YEAR, FROM LEFT: GOTHAM/GC IMAGES; DANIELE VENTURELLI/WIREIMAGE; LOREDANA SANGIULIANO/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES. COMEBACK OF THE YEAR, FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF VALENTINO (6); BREAKTHROUGH DESIGNER OF THE YEAR: PAUL YEM.

BREAKTHROUGH DESIGNER OF THE YEAR

WILLY CHAVARRIA

THIS YEAR, Willy Chavarria claimed his place as a critically important voice in American fashion. The Willy wave has been building for some time: The Chicano designer's finely crafted workwear and exaggerated prom suits—tailored with a badass, never-kitschy flair—earned him the top menswear prize at the 2023 CFDA Awards. But it wasn't until this fall that Chavarria left a truly indelible impression.

Chavarria, 57, is hardly a fresh face—he spent most of his career working in the corporate-fashion establishment. Since going solo in 2015, the Fresno, California–born, New York–bred designer has faced the challenges that confront any young brand. Chavarria has responded with a unique ranginess. As business grew, he unveiled a collection of couture opera coats and, earlier this year, a provocative line of pre-distressed underwear that drew on his experience as a designer at Joe Boxer and Calvin Klein. Some of the most tasteful and influential celebrities have noticed: Kendrick Lamar wore a Willy Chavarria track suit in his "Not Like Us" music video.

In September, Chavarria built on the buzz, bringing New York Fashion Week to an abandoned bank on Wall Street for his treatise on "América," as he dubbed his spring-summer '25 collection. In an acrimonious election year with anti-immigrant rhetoric flooding the airwaves, Chavarria told a story steeped in pride.

Set under an enormous star-spangled banner, it was an ode to the working class, delivered through United Farm Workers sweatshirts, cropped mechanics shirts, and dungarees tailored in Chavarria's signature oversized proportion. Chavarria commands among the most inclusive runways in the business, and his crew of tough, tattoo-covered models embodied a crystal clear idea of beauty and power woefully absent in the wider fashion world. "It's really about the fact that all of us belong, all of us have purpose, and all of us have the ability to make change in this country," Chavarria said backstage.

Chavarria's codes are solidifying, but he still has tricks up his sleeves. The show appeared to be over when the music darkened, then out came a surprise Adidas collaboration, an extensive capsule inspired by NBA legend and activist Kareem Abdul-Jabbar that will introduce Willy Chavarria to his biggest audience yet. The designer made clear that he sees no limits on his empowering vision for American menswear. "I want to make sure that I'm creating collections for all people to wear," he said. —S.H.

SHOE OF THE YEAR

DAINTY LITTLE SHOES

Bode

Magliano

Dior Men's

The Row

FOR A LONG while, the biggest thing in men's footwear was, well, bigness. Balenciaga has been locked in an arm's race with itself for years now, unleashing ever-more-gargantuan sneakers season after season. The Big Red Boots by the fashion pranksters at MSCHF, meanwhile, ran rampant over the internet last year. But a funny thing happened in 2024: Our shoes shrank. And they didn't merely return to regular sizes. Instead, guys suddenly gravitated to svelter, more delicate, and, yes, more demure choices—ballet flats, Mary Janes, and low-slung slippers, all with little-to-no outsoles to speak of. That change in dimension brought a touch of welcome contrast to the wider silhouettes that continued to dominate menswear—and gave our feet a break from lugging around all those concrete-block work boots and clown-size runners. —Y.G.

FINALE OF THE YEAR

DRIES VAN NOTEN

Dries Van Noten took his final bow on the runway in June.

"IT WAS THE last chance for me to take risks, so I grabbed it," said Dries Van Noten of his swan song in June, which marked the 150th and final collection in the Belgian menswear legend's hall of fame career. Designers don't always know how or when to hang up their shears, but Van Noten went out on his own terms: with the world's most graceful retirement party. Rather than stage a retrospective of his greatest hits, he drew over 800 admirers to the outskirts of Paris for a poignant production full of fresh ideas for how to dress with intrigue and elegance. (Followed, of course, by a night of disco dancing.) It was a reminder that Van Noten left menswear much better than he found it, and a clear message to his successor. As he put it: "They have to dare, they have to move forward." —S.H.

SHOE OF THE YEAR, FROM TOP: COURTESY OF BODE; COURTESY OF MAGLIANO; COURTESY OF DIOR MEN'S; COURTESY OF THE ROW. FINALE OF THE YEAR: GIOVANNI GIANNONI/WWD VIA GETTY IMAGES. RENEGADE OF THE YEAR, RUNWAY: COURTESY OF BALENCIAGA. MOST STYLISH PERSON OF THE YEAR, FROM LEFT: THEIMAGEDIRECT.COM; ROWBEN LANTION/BAFTA VIA GETTY IMAGES; VICTOR BOYKO/GETTY IMAGES FOR GUCCI; JOJO KORSH/BFA.COM.

RENEGADE OF THE YEAR

DEMNA FOR BALENCIAGA

→ **"FASHION NEEDS** to get messed up, it needs to get fucked up.... It needs not to be based on fear," said Demna in September. For the past decade, the Balenciaga creative director has gleefully ignored the rise and fall of trends to define his own avant-garde universe of style. And as fashion took refuge in the cashmere folds of quiet luxury, Demna found a new gear. Thought "streetwear" was dead? Demna dropped the most extreme Franken-sneaker of his career, then engineered an entire haute couture collection out of T-shirts and hoodies and bombers and jeans. And to close out the year, he threw his own playbook out the window, subverting the oversized, protective silhouette he popularized with a downright steamy show featuring clever lingerie bodysuits and scintillating low-rise jeans, precisely cut right on the fearless edge. —S.H.

Balenciaga is for the fashion die-hards.

MOST STYLISH PERSON OF THE YEAR

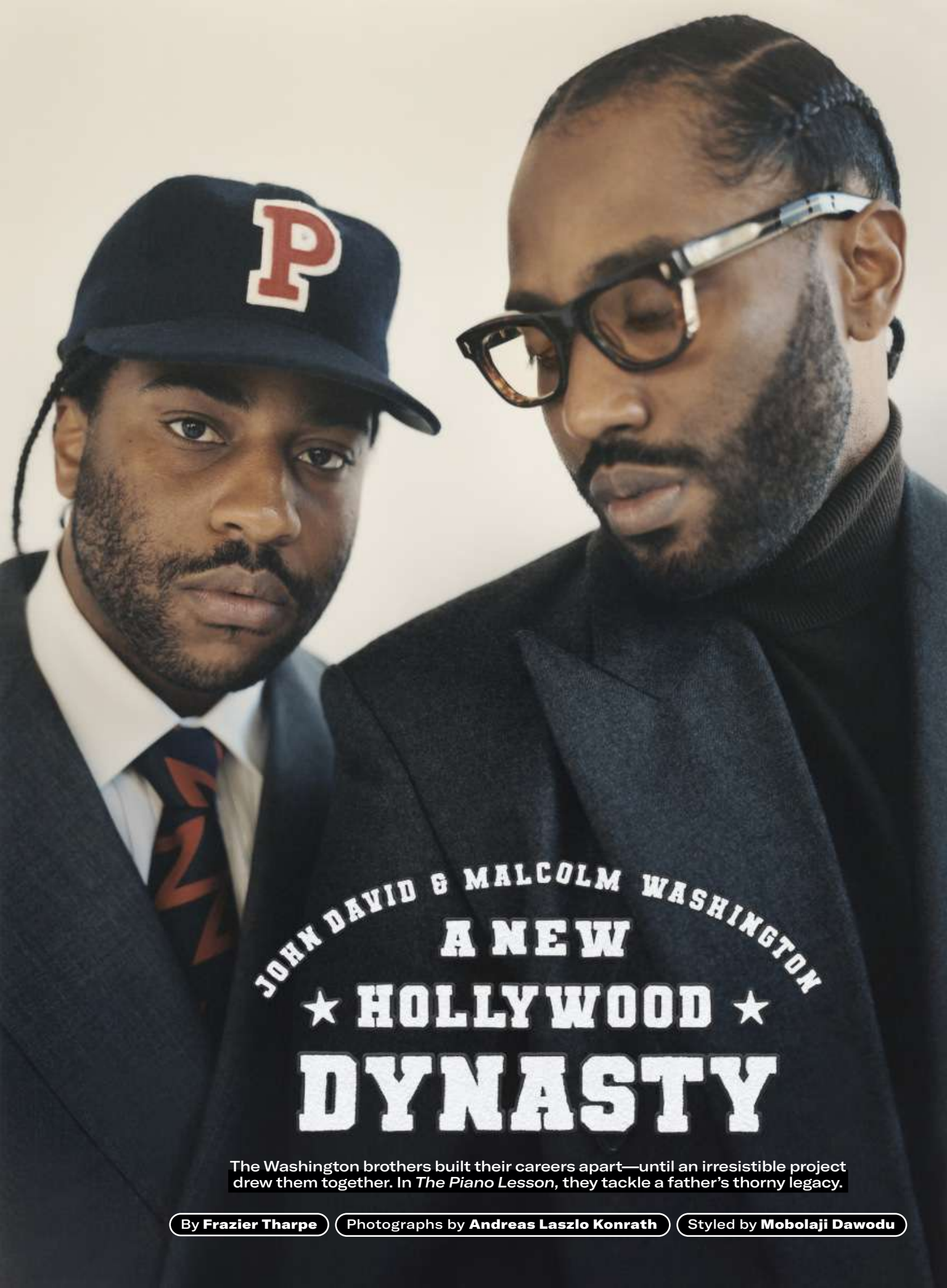
PAUL MESCAL

→ **EVER SINCE** Paul Mescal and his "Connell chain" graced our screens in 2020's *Normal People,* the Irishman has been nearly as heralded for his acting chops as his refreshingly regular off-duty wardrobe of cropped tees, just-snug-enough denim, fraying Carhartt jackets, and, most crucially, quad-baring short shorts. ("I'm a fan of the short inseam," Mescal told *GQ* at a Gucci show in June. "I'm a big advocate for men wearing shorter shorts.") After proving he was exceedingly good at wearing normal clothes, he let his clever red-carpet suits elevate him to an aspirational menswear god. But Mescal's most memorable style maneuver this year transpired during a late-night Sweetgreen run in Manhattan, when he donned a teensy pair of Gaelic football shorts, kelly green Adidas sneakers, and a generously cropped hoodie. The actor's outfit left the internet simultaneously coveting his micro athleticwear, gym routine, and go-to salad order. (One dogged TikToker claimed it was the pesto bowl.)
—EILEEN CARTTER

Paul Mescal proves that true style is about having the confidence to bare midriff on a salad run.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **JASON NOCITO**

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024



JOHN DAVID & MALCOLM WASHINGTON

A NEW ★ HOLLYWOOD ★ DYNASTY

The Washington brothers built their careers apart—until an irresistible project drew them together. In *The Piano Lesson*, they tackle a father's thorny legacy.

By **Frazier Tharpe** | Photographs by **Andreas Laszlo Konrath** | Styled by **Mobolaji Dawodu**

The Piano Lesson, the fourth play in legendary playwright August Wilson's acclaimed Pittsburgh Cycle, two siblings grapple with the shadow of their father's history. Wilson's seminal tales have long been layups for film adaptations, but the new silver screen take on *The Piano Lesson,* due this November from Netflix, offers a delicious meta-textual spin: John David Washington stars as one of the siblings—Boy Willie, the boisterous schemer with no time for family sentiment—in one of his most arresting roles yet. The director? His younger brother, Malcolm, making his feature-film debut.

The irony isn't lost on the Washingtons, the eldest (John David) and youngest (Malcolm) children of Denzel, a man with a foregone claim to the Greatest Actor of All Time title, who's not too shabby of a director himself. It's a beautiful September morning in the waning days of summer, and the brothers are meeting for breakfast at the Bowery Hotel in New York. The family resemblance, as well as their distinctiveness, is almost immediately evident. Malcolm, 33, pulls up in a vintage France soccer jersey and pants—casual, chic, ready to wax poetic about art, his influences. He's still new to all of this, especially compared with John David, 40, who's been working steadily in the business for nearly a decade. He's already seated, wearing a Drake tee (he's bipartisan, he stresses, having worn a Kendrick Lamar tee the day prior) and shorts—relaxed but ready for action at a moment's notice. He speaks with the poise of an athlete at a postgame presser, but he's not above bursting into an earned fit of laughter or, as was more often the case, shifting the spotlight to praise his brother.

"I've been a fan of Malcolm's work since I can remember, after seeing his shorts and music videos," John David says. "I've been wanting him to go. Like, when? It was like 'Exhibit C.' "Malcolm swoops in with Jay Electronica's verse, "*[Nas] hit me up on the phone, said 'What you waitin' on?' "*—the first of many rap allusions they'd make throughout the conversation.

Confronting legacy, Malcolm's film argues, is inevitable. It can also be a spiritual experience, which is how he found himself drawn to working on a film produced by his father. But to hear Malcolm tell it, the call to make this project was coming from well beyond the house. Having honed his craft with various shorts, Malcolm tells me, he hadn't been "fishing" around for stories, but when he read *The Piano Lesson,* Wilson's text took up permanent residence. "I just immediately was engaging with the ideas in it, and they were really big. Big not from a production standpoint—the ideas in there were so big and existential that I felt like I had to deal with that, engage in it, for myself, just for my own spirit."

John David jumps in with a sports analogy, a common turn for the former college running back. "I didn't approach it as working with my brother," he explains. "I liken it to a player running through a brick wall for his coach. He says, 'Jump,' I ask, 'How high?' I was so excited about his approach and his perspective to this story."

This is extraordinarily high praise coming from John David, who has established himself as a formidable performer in films like Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* and Christopher Nolan's *Tenet.* From his breakthrough role on HBO's *Ballers*—he did not mention his Hollywood pedigree during his audition—to *The Creator,* his last big movie, a heady sci-fi action film from Gareth Edwards, he's mostly eschewed familial collaborations. It's an approach he wrestled with at Morehouse too.

Even then, John David wanted to defuse notions of nepotism—and forge his own identity apart from his family. "That was the arrow, that was the battery, that was the engine," John David recalls. "So I'm going to sustain these six concussions and broken collarbones and torn Achilles in the name of independence. And I had an added bonus of the helmet syndrome: They don't even know what I look like. I can just run the ball out, and they'd be like, 'Who was that kid?' "

Despite superlative achievement on the football field—he held Morehouse's single-game and career-leading rushing records and spent a couple of seasons on the periphery of the NFL—an injury brought that era of his life to a close. The sudden end of football forced him to realize that he might have been using the sport as a crutch. "I always wanted to act," John David says. "It was a magic trick seeing my dad come home with red hair because he was getting ready for *Malcolm X,* or seeing him in tights doing Shakespeare in the Park when I was, like, five. I thought that was cool, seeing my mom sit down on the piano and play without needing any notes. The skill set

←←
OPENING PAGES, FROM LEFT
ON JOHN DAVID
jacket and pants
Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello
turtleneck
Loro Piana
belt
Artemas Quibble
boots
Tom Ford
glasses
Jacques Marie Mage
bracelet, his own

ON MALCOLM
suit
The Armoury
shirt
Dunhill
tie
Paul Stuart
shoes
Morjas
socks
London Sock Co.
hat and bracelet, his own

←
OPPOSITE PAGE
coat and shirt
Isaia
pants
Yohji Yamamoto Pour Homme
watch
Omega
bracelet
Miansai

THIS PAGE
cardigan
Emporio Armani
shirt
Dolce & Gabbana
hat
Begg x Co

and the craft was what got me going, got me charged. And then as I watched my father's relationship to the business and how he was growing, I became a bit more guarded and a bit more reserved." In time, Denzel Washington became *Denzel,* a one-name supernova, the guy who, unfairly or not, Black leading men are measured against. Now imagine being a Black leading man who also has his last name.

For Malcolm, becoming an artist—even in the field his father dominated—was akin to answering a call so loud that it drowned out any such nepo hesitations: "You take your ego out of it. I'm working to build something larger than me. The people that we grew up revering were always in service to something larger. It's like [James] Baldwin isn't writing for Baldwin. Baldwin is writing for me, 50 years later, to put the world in a context for me to understand. So I think once we all accepted the mission of working towards being artists, that's the mandate."

The John David of *Ballers* would have probably balked at the idea of starring in a film that is essentially one big Washington Family Production: Malcolm behind the camera, their sister Katia producing alongside Dad himself. Today he can admit the chip on his shoulder wasn't a sustainable mindset. "It was

bad fuel, it wasn't healthy," he says. "I'm freer now because of August Wilson and being able to exorcise whatever I needed to get off from the theater to the screen. I obviously thought joining the Avengers on this project, [these] questions might come up. And I was excited because August Wilson gave me the right to be secure in my artistry and to be secure in myself. I'm able to sit here and talk to you even comfortably about that today because of August Wilson."

Given Denzel Washington's practically mythological reputation as a theater nerd with a special attention to geeking over Wilson, you can almost picture the Washingtons gathered around their Sunday dinner table in the Valley, where the brothers grew up, reciting passages for their parents over supper.

"Yeah, at the cookout," John David wisecracks sarcastically, impersonating his dad. "'*And you: Go, monologue.*' Can you imagine?" In reality it's just another bit of the spiritual kismet they've been waxing on about all morning.

John David's big point of contact was when he played Boy Willie just two years ago, in a Broadway reimagining of *The Piano Lesson,* alongside another of the "Wilsonian OGs," as he dubs them, Samuel L. Jackson, who once played Boy Willie himself. Comparing the stage to the screen, John David says, "That's the NHL. This is the NFL. Totally different sport. So if I rely on these things that were helping me for the play, it's not necessarily applicable. Malcolm totally remixed it.... Now I have to rework stuff. Which is a good thing. I get to adapt."

→
FROM LEFT
ON JOHN DAVID
sweater
Canali
necklace,
his own
ON MALCOLM
coat
Engineered Garments
sweater
Ralph Lauren Purple Label
necklace,
his own

grooming by yvette shelton at italent. tailoring by ksenia golub.

The result is one of John David's most kinetic performances to date. As Boy Willie he is all surface charm and simmering rage, a man bursting with anger at his station in life and a desperation to change it. John David says putting his performance in the hands of his younger brother left him with more confidence in himself. "I learned to trust myself more," John David says. "When you don't get a response or feedback from a take, trust that's because we got it. Because he likes it. Sometimes you feel like you are a fish in a fish tank as an actor. And it was interesting: When Malcolm would feel good about something, sometimes he would just move on, which was a beautiful thing. And then you see the final product like: *Ohhh*."

The most critical hurdle seems to have been earning their father's trust to respect their own interpretations. Malcolm cites certain scenes and monologues that he brought a different texture to, even noting that the "rhythm of the edit" feels more contemporary. "I think [our dad] was so down with the conceit that the movie was working under, which is, Let's introduce and show young people that August Wilson is a part of them, too, that they have access to it, that they're a part of that lineage. Let's open the door for them to engage in it."

One part of the Malcolm feel is the music—the film, set in 1936, notably ends on an anachronistic note, with Frank Ocean's "Wither" playing into the credits. "I'm sure you know Frank is an enigma," Malcolm says, laughing as he recalls how he secured the *Endless* cut. "You put a smoke signal in the air and then you hope it gets to him. I put it [into the cut] and I'm like, I can't see the movie any other way now. And time was ticking.... Literally a day or two days before we had to lock the song, a message comes in: *Frank says, thumbs up.* And he was so nice about it. He basically gave it to us for free and was just like, Go off."

Did John David impart big-brother wisdom to his youngest sibling working on his debut feature? John David, of course, instantly shrugs that off: "He stepped in like he's been doing this for years. So I didn't know if anything that I could say would be beneficial to his growth. Maybe what not to do, I guess."

Malcolm shoots back a deadpan look. "He gave me so much game, bro," Malcolm says, laughing. "But I think he's being honest, because it wasn't like there was a day we sat down and he said, '*Here's how they gon' come at you,*'" he says, referring to Jay-Z schooling a young Drake on the dangers of the rap game on "Light Up." "A lot of conversation we had in the beginning of this process was about *this* part," Malcolm says, as in, this interview. "You were like, 'Here's the spectrum of what's going to happen after. Prepare yourself.'"

Prepare yourself for the probing questions that stray beyond the art and interrogate personal lives, familial connections, and private relationships. Through his adaptation of the play, Malcolm argues that heritage is unavoidable—it's all about how you contend with it. "Building on what was left for you, it's a piano, whatever it is," he reasons. "Because there's a transient energy to it, too, where it's like, Okay, I'm here for a little bit of time. People before me got us to this point. You pick it up and then somebody's going to pick it up after you. And it's like you want to have a great run to your leg." He continues, "You're trying to carve out your own name, too, you want to have a voice. But there's peace and protection in knowing that you stand on that ground."

"I find great peace and protection in knowing that we come from a proud culture, an accomplished culture," John David adds. "Sam Jackson. Michael Potts. I think we're standing on all their shoulders." He has come around to a healthier perspective on being inevitably measured against long shadows. "That also can mean I made somebody feel the way I used to feel when I watched their stuff. I'll take that comparison. Because they're not necessarily calling me the next *that,* but they are saying, I had *those* feelings when I saw you. And that connectivity, that sort of fraternity of feeling is like a drug, honestly. And if I can get one person to feel this way, and they lead the community based off of something they saw in me, mission accomplished."

And yet, early buzz for the film is strong enough to start throwing the words *Academy Award* around—especially for John David's co-lead, Danielle Deadwyler. The boys shrug this off—it's September, all they can focus on is waiting for the theatrical release and gauging the reactions at the big festivals like the Toronto International Film Festival and the screening they held the night before we spoke, which even brought out unexpected curious viewers like the rapper Fabolous.

To the Washington brothers, pursuing their calling means there's value in the work regardless of how it might be reviewed or received. Malcolm describes the process of actually making a film as Sisyphean. "Your movie wants to be bad every day [on set]," he says. "You're just fighting for your life. You have to fight to keep it above water. And so by the time you get to the end, it's like there's so much respect."

Now that they've finally rolled the rock up the mountain, not only surviving their father's mandate to "protect my guy," but also earning his trust to develop Wilson's text in their own language, are they ready to run it back? Are we looking at another royal Black family of creatives almost always working in concert, like the Wayans? Malcolm sounds exasperated at the thought. "We *just* made a movie," he says, laughing, "I think this was a good trial run," coyly implying he has no firm designs on what he wants to do next. Would he, say, be the director that helps get a project like Marvel's beleaguered Blade off the ground? "If it was lit," Malcolm offers. "I'm not in a position right now to say no. I feel like I did before I made this movie, where it's like if something speaks and I have to engage in it, I'm going to engage in it no matter what it is."

As for John David, the million-dollar question: Say there's a film with a *Looper*-esque plot that calls for some father-son casting—Denzel as the Protagonist in a *Tenet 2*–type flick—is he in? John David cracks up at the idea. "I feel like Spike is the only one that can get y'all out," Malcolm half jokes. "Listen, I will work for food. You know what I'm saying?"

FRAZIER THARPE *is* GQ*'s senior associate editor.*

Laura

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

Katt Williams Man

In January, the comic delivered an instantly iconic podcast interview that threw pop culture into crisis—and seemed to predict all manner of messy celebrity gossip to come. At home on his farm, Williams explains why he said what he said—and why he'd do it again, and again, and again....

By **Matthew Trammell**

Photographs by **Eric Johnson**

IT'S A PERFECTLY warm, still-aired dusk, and the lights are about to come on over the basketball court that sits on the sprawling hundred-acre property of Katt Williams. Highlights include a small golf course, waterfalls, and livestock he tends to daily. Sheep, pigs, cows, warthogs, and goats mill about in the distance as he checks me the ball.

We'd driven by the court earlier during a tour in his hulking, black Apocalypse truck. "That's the basketball court, where anybody can get it, at any point. Like right now, anybody can get a taste of it," Williams warned me, and I couldn't pass up the chance. So we've been knocking points back and forth in a pickup game to 11. Neither of us is dressed for the occasion: Williams sports a pair of Grateful Dead Nike Dunks and a purple Supreme box logo T-shirt, while I'm in loose black jeans. But I know better than to show up on Katt's court and not give him a good game.

Williams—the 53-year-old stand-up comedian and actor who has carved out an acclaimed and lucrative lane on the edge of the mainstream—plays regularly, he says. Despite being famously short in stature, he shows an ability to dart to the basket, scoop layups under the defense, and at least attempt an off-balance right hook shot pretty consistently. And while I love playing the game, I possess little natural intelligence for it. So, as Williams takes a 6-4 lead, I start using my size advantage in the paint—doing what I call in my head "making space."

Afterward, as we sip Liquid Deaths, he warmly explains that what I call making space is, in fact, fouling. I apologize, and he stops me. "No, no, no," he says. "That's not how we apologize in basketball. That's not how that works. You go, 'Oh, I fouled you? My bad. I'm not allowed to push you, whether I got the ball or not.' But if a guy pushes and thinks that's making a play, I'm not gon' be the one to tutor this guy."

He delivers this post-game monologue in signature fashion, slow and unfurling, with a high-pitched bite. His stand-up routines and interviews can stretch out in this manner, casual but eviscerating. Even his assistant is laughing at me.

"In the streets," Williams says, "we have to chin-check him, you follow what I'm saying? And I mean, in jail, this guy gotta die today. We don't even care what he belong to." Katt Williams is roasting my pickup game—a personalized comedy routine from one of the greatest comics alive. It turns out anybody could get it, at any time.

Williams has spent the past two decades making searingly original and memorable inroads into movies, television shows, and stand-up specials—but for much of 2024, he's been living on these sprawling grounds, doing a little bit of everything: looking after the livestock, growing crops, playing Call of Duty and racing simulators, and working on his next stand-up special for Netflix. He's done it all in preciously cultivated solitude while basking in the glory set off by his explosive appearance on retired NFL star Shannon Sharpe's *Club Shay Shay* podcast in January. During that conversation, which has been viewed 81 million times and counting on YouTube, Williams spent nearly three hours speaking with a candid and confrontational tone rarely heard from polite celebrity society. "All lies," he told Sharpe early on, "will be exposed." In between instantly viral insults, he accused rival comedians, industry executives, and basically the whole entertainment apparatus of playing foul—of stealing jokes, misleading fans, planting celebrities, and making (sometimes literal) deals with the devil. In response, the internet took to calling 2024 the "year of truth."

Everything that happened after that was a surprise, especially to Shannon Sharpe. "I never in a million years thought that everything that transpired would happen," Sharpe tells me of the episode's success. He hadn't met Williams before the interview but was a fan of his comedy and had been trying to book him for a year. Still, he had no idea where their talk would go. "If you notice, after I introduce him and we taste my cognac, I'm about to go into my questions. He takes off. As the interviewer, I have to make a split-second decision. Do I cut him off and go where I originally wanted to go, or do I let him go? And in that split second, I let him go."

Williams tells me he prepared the points he brought to Sharpe, and wanted fans to hit pause and fact-check him in real time. Listening to him speak, in the interview and in person, it's hard not to feel like Sharpe: shocked, amused, bewildered, curious, and silently in awe of Katt's unfiltered onslaught.

Most of Williams's jabs were targeted at his peers in comedy and Hollywood (Steve Harvey, Kevin Hart). I ask him about his early days in the business, and whether his opting to go on such an offensive this year had to do with the competition he experienced then. "No," he said, explaining that he was merely interested in keeping the standards for professional comedy high. "For all sports, you have to be good enough to get in the league. And we had a league"—comedy—"where that didn't apply. We had a league where a person could walk across the street and say, 'I'm a comedian!'" he says. "We all wanted to believe that it was about who was the funniest. And if it's that, then there's no problems. But when there are other factors, that's when it gets hectic."

During our time together, Williams picked up right where he left off with his fellow comedians in the *Club Shay Shay* interview, maintaining the various gripes he has with Steve Harvey and Cedric the Entertainer, and even addressing his farm animals with names of comics Lil Rel, Michael Blackson, and Faizon Love. (Many of the figures Williams has riffed on have publicly dismissed what he's said about them.)

Beneath all the disses is a strong, almost political motivation: Williams points to his introduction to Hollywood, and the resistance he got from networks in trying to create tasteful Black programming, questioning why network executives found it so difficult to imagine Black cooking shows, weather programs, or children's television. "I was trying to make this safe place for Black actors and comedians, where the politics and the hierarchy and the casting couch didn't apply," he says. "My whole career I was trying to do good Black business that you could be proud of. And it was always stopped." That experience seeded a distrust of institutions that informs his perspective to this day.

But the most striking subject in the Sharpe interview, especially in hindsight, was Sean "Diddy" Combs. For his part, Williams mentioned Combs only glancingly: In reference to a question about Dave Chappelle's decision to turn down a $50 million deal from Comedy Central nearly 20 years ago, Williams tells Sharpe that he himself has turned down the same amount a number of times—primarily to avoid the apparent sexual demands that he says would have come with it. "Because P. Diddy be wanting to party," Williams says, "and you got to tell him no!" And then, in September—a full eight months after these comments on *Club Shay Shay*—Combs was arrested and charged in federal court with sex trafficking by force, fraud, or coercion; racketeering conspiracy; and transportation to engage in prostitution, and was accused in the indictment of "creating a criminal enterprise" and engaging in a "persistent and pervasive pattern of abuse toward women and other individuals," with some accusations going as far back as 2008. Fans were stunned that Williams seemed to have predicted—or at least foreshadowed—Combs's downfall. As the year went on, videos and GIFs of a winking Williams seemed to flood the internet whenever big, messy news broke. In the process, Williams, who himself has had a storied but often tumultuous career,

All clothing, subject's own.

GROOMING, SHERITA LESLIE USING DANESSA MYRICKS.

reemerged in the public imagination as an everyman prophet—one who faced the beast that is Hollywood, escaped by the skin of his teeth, and ran back to tell the common folk what he'd seen.

When I ask how Diddy ended up on his list, Williams responds by telling me a story about another rapper. "So when I was a young man, Tupac was my favorite artist," he explains. "I loved Tupac. And I felt like we were kindred spirits. So if I hear you responsible for knocking my n-gga off"—referring, here, to longstanding public speculation that Diddy may have been involved in Shakur's death, which recently reemerged amid reports of a court record in which a suspect charged with Shakur's murder implicated Diddy to the police—"I don't give a fuck what job I end up being in, I don't care how things go, if I can get a way to get you, that's what I'm all about. I just don't like you walking around scot-free. 'Cause you a demon, and I know demons are powerful, but I know why they're powerful.... It's cold spiritual warfare going on out here in the real world. And part of my job is to not lose focus on that."

Combs has not been found guilty of any crime. In an official statement to the press concerning the September indictment, Combs's attorney Marc Agnifilo has maintained Combs's innocence, calling the prosecution of his client "unjust." Agnifilo also claimed Combs has been cooperating with the investigation and had voluntarily relocated to New York in anticipation of the charges. "These are the acts of an innocent man with nothing to hide, and he looks forward to clearing his name in court," he said. "He is an imperfect person, but he is not a criminal." Combs hasn't been arrested or charged with any crime related to Shakur's death. He has publicly denied claims that he had any connection with the murder. Following reports about the court record that led to further public speculation about the case this year, law enforcement sources told TMZ that Combs was "never a suspect in Tupac's murder investigation, and that remains true today."

What stands out to Williams's fans about his line about Diddy, as well as his earlier stand-up riffs on Michael Jackson and R. Kelly, and other behind-closed-doors fodder, is that Williams seems willing to speak on topics that others in Hollywood avoid. To many of his fans, it is a welcome antidote to the canned, careful discourse of so many of his peers.

Williams's recurring themes—the Illuminati, demons, cold spiritual warfare—aren't without context: He has been thinking about good and evil for a long time. Raised in Dayton, Ohio, Williams grew up a Jehovah's Witness, and though he's no longer a member of the religion, he speaks openly about faith, littering our conversations with references to God, Jesus, and the Bible. A childhood spent first listening to other Jehovah's Witnesses, and then emulating them, informed a later life spent onstage. He recalls addressing enormous Jehovah's Witnesses conventions, 10,000-people strong—at five years old. "It's a big deal for me," he remembers of the first of those gigs. "I'm getting dressed up special, and I know I'm gonna be in front of these people, and I'm practicing what it is I'm going to be saying. And I'm going to be presenting it," he says. "It's what I've *been* doing."

If Williams's comedy was influenced by his upbringing, over time he also took on the role of your conspiratorial friend—the one well-read enough that you trusted his facts, and funny enough that you came back for more during next Sunday's football game. On the road, Williams honed his affect: Adopting a mock disbelief at the world as it's been allowed to be run, he preaches from the diaphragm about the government, relationships, religion, cloned meat, flyover states, disabled athletes, and anything else—a wide-ranging, channel-surfing take on comedy and culture.

In one of his most groundbreaking bits, from 2006's *Pimp Chronicles,* he asks the audience what the Iraqi military's uniform looks like ("Don't worry, I'll wait") before delivering the punch line to the silence: "'Cause you ain't ever seen that motherfucker! We ain't killing their *army,* n-gga, we killing *them*. We're over there killing n-ggas in sweatpants, tank tops, flip-flops, and a cowboy hat." Highlighting the subtle way war had evolved from two militaries fighting each other to one military fighting a people, the joke has only grown more resonant through the many years and many wars fought since. "I'm sharing a true experience," he says to me, by way of explanation. "*I* noticed this, so I'm turning to my friends and going…." He smiles. "And it holds up, because you shouldn't be getting this information from a comedian."

BUT WHY NOW? What about 2024 made it the year of truth for Katt Williams? "I didn't ask God to let me be in charge of no shit," he says. "I didn't ask him to let me run nothing. I just asked him to let me know things around the corner, before others…so that I could be the person to tell my people."

And why was *Club Shay Shay* the home for Katt's manifesto? Why did he give the interview of the year to Sharpe? "Shannon is in the rare position where people aren't sure where his allegiance lies," Williams explains, again riding the line between plainspokenness and supposition. "People aren't sure if Shannon been bought and paid for. Is he in the pocket, 'cause these n-ggas paying him, or is he really just a regular? There's so many questions that it gives me the opportunity to allow this Black man to show his true colors, while I show mine." Williams says that Sharpe represented the exact fan he wanted to reach. He was also empathetic to the restrained way Sharpe handled his contentious departure from the Fox Sports show *Undisputed*. "The way he handled it was just for us," Williams says. The two have remained friends since the interview, and check in with each other on the phone.

We're sitting in the main house on Williams's property, in a comfortable living room lined with paintings, photographs, and books by Black artists and authors. A TV hums with MMA highlights.

He wants to clarify—this wasn't just a 2024 thing. "It's not the year of truth," he says. "It's the *age* of truth." And to Williams, it's the age of truth for what he says is a simple reason. "It's not that people ain't been wanting the truth. It's that, for the first time ever, whoever them motherfuckers are that would be involved in the Illuminati, and the shadow government, and all of that shit that really exists, that really runs the world, all of them is 80 to 100 right now. So the viciousness to keep these secrets at bay, and the ability to keep you from knowing shit, right now, doesn't really apply. You could really find out whatever the fuck you needed to find out right now."

Doing so, Williams says, requires little more than bravery, curiosity, and some cash. "If you had some money, and you gave a shit about finding out shit, you could be one of the most powerful men in America," he says. "And that's been my lane: being able to find out why these powerful entities are powerful. To find out why these people that are being taken advantage of are being taken advantage of, and to try to figure out the pipeline. Because all of it exists, and it's all real."

All of this talk in 2024 made it surprising when, after taking aim at the entire comedy establishment, Williams delivered what some critics called a rare miss with *Woke Foke,* a Netflix special that was widely viewed but failed to produce the belly laughs he's known for. Anticipation was high, but after it aired, the response on social media and among critics was underwhelming at best. I was curious if he was aware how the special was received.

He always listens to his audience, he says. But: "No franchise that sells you season tickets can promise you what kind of season your team finna have. I would be facetious if I say all I do is win. But if you ever see me losing, know that I'm doing the best that I can, and that if there was another way around this, that's what I would be taking," he says. "When I've done the classic comedy special that everybody loves, it feels exactly the same as this last one. Because my output is the same."

In order to ensure his creative freedom, Williams says, he prefers to do as much by himself as he can—he has sometimes accused his entertainment rivals of being compromised by their lucrative sponsorships and contracts. He tells me he designs his own sets, hires his own opening acts, and otherwise avoids outsourcing business if he doesn't have to. His work with Netflix, which he describes as a "great relationship," has opened up new paths for an already independent-minded figure. This year, he says, he's purchased a former military base in Alabama with the intention of launching his own movie studio, inspired by the production companies and studios launched by Donald Glover, 50 Cent, and Tyler Perry. "It's just not fair to put all that pressure on Tyler Perry," he says. "He can only do so much."

But Williams feels comedy is the "only" outlet that permits real truth-telling. "I haven't seen a reverend get away with it. I haven't seen a politician get away with it. I've not seen nobody who has been in a position where they were allowed to expose lies, accentuate the truth, and blow a little whistle."

WILLIAMS WILL GO back on tour in January, with comics Mark Curry, Tommy Davidson, Eddie Griffin, and Mo'Nique, who will be hosting. One likely stand-up subject? His views on men and women, a staple in many of Williams's sets. For years, he's given men advice on how to treat their "franchise player," and dished bedroom tips that could only fly on HBO. Sitting across from the guy that played Money Mike and A Pimp Named Slickback, in a year in part defined by the revelation of ugly behavior by famous men towards women, I can't help but ask: What advice does Katt Williams have for men heading into 2025?

"I would start by, first of all, saying thank you to women," he says, for challenging men to be better. He suggests that without healthy paternal examples of masculinity, the average man will continue to fall short. "I'm saying, expect a deficiency. If this guy don't know how to be Superman, it's because he didn't watch the movie. Has he heard of Superman? Yeah. But he don't know how to act like it—if he did, he would. Right? So we just have to understand that things happen for a reason…. I would say to the man in the relationship, listen to what it is she's complaining about, just because there's something to it."

He pauses and then continues, finding the humor in the beat, once again knocking Hollywood stars down to the everyman level. "We all know that, for the first time in history, the beautiful people single and struggling too. It ain't just you, little ugly at home going through it. You could watch a big ol' famous multimillionaire somebody be on Instagram"—he mock-sobs—"'Ughh, he left me!' Yup. Just like you at Family Dollar, just like you at Dollar General. Right?"

Williams is joking, and conspiracizing, and preaching a little too. He closes by offering something perhaps unexpected: not an insult, or an allegation. Just some good, old-fashioned advice.

"If you have something of value, do what's best for *you*, and keep your assets in good working order," he says. "If you have a nice car, because of how many pieces-of-shit cars you had before, you would say, 'Man, if I had a brand-new one I would check the oil on that motherfucker all the time.' Yeah, do that. That's all I would say."

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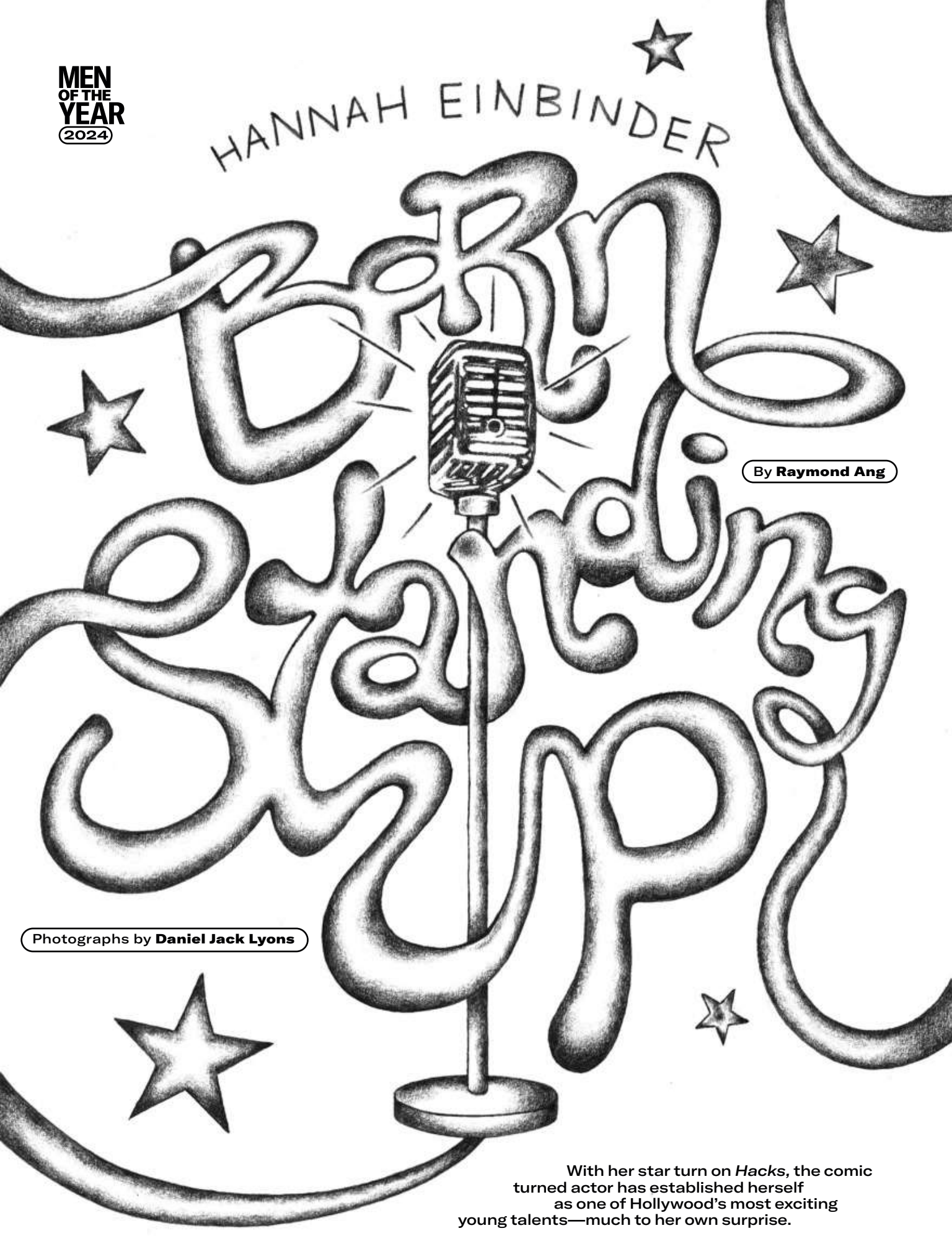
MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

HANNAH EINBINDER

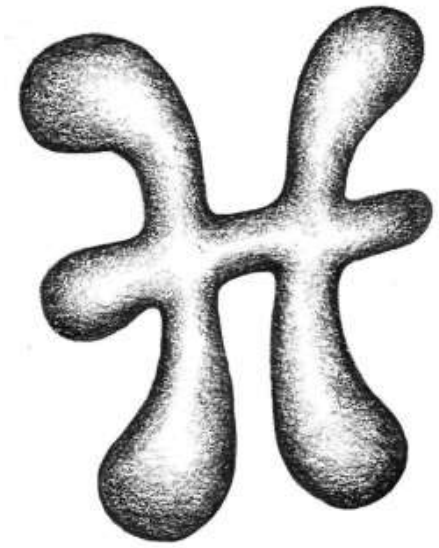
Breaking Stardom

By **Raymond Ang**

Photographs by **Daniel Jack Lyons**



With her star turn on *Hacks*, the comic turned actor has established herself as one of Hollywood's most exciting young talents—much to her own surprise.



ANNAH EINBINDER thought she was being written out of a job.

She was reading through the script for the second-season finale of *Hacks,* the award-winning HBO series for which she'd received an Emmy nomination. In one pivotal scene, her character—caustic Gen Z comic Ava—was going to be fired by her boss, the legendary comedian Deborah Vance (played by Jean Smart). During her first year on the show, Einbinder had grappled with an intense case of imposter syndrome: It was her first acting role and she frequently felt out of her depth, like a lottery winner with a new BMW and no driver's license. The Emmy nomination for her work on the first season of the show didn't help. "The Academy's sad for me," she convinced herself. "They feel bad for me, they're giving me a nomination."

So she took that season's cliff-hanger as the confirmation of her worst fears. She was sure that she was looking at her last script.

"I thought I was being written off the show—deadass. Not even kidding," she says. "I was literally like, I knew it. I'm bad. I suck at this."

"She called us crying," recalls Lucia Aniello, one of the creators and showrunners of *Hacks.* "She did think that she was getting fired."

Einbinder didn't need to worry. "The truth is," Aniello tells me, "Hannah showed up to set on day one of season one being perfect. I think now she realizes that there isn't really a show without her." And with her, the show has boomed. The second season was another smash, and its third season exceeded even those very high expectations, burnishing its reputation as one of the best shows on TV.

These days, Einbinder can tell the story of her spiral while laughing incredulously, as she did when we sat down for a meal at her neighborhood Vietnamese restaurant in East LA. "I think about that now and I go, Girl, are you out of your fucking mind?"

"That's the thing," she adds. "You can't reason with your demons. You just gotta battle them hard."

When *Hacks* debuted in 2021, critical attention tended justifiably to revolve around Smart and her career-best performance as a bruised but indefatigable comedy legend who in her prime defied gender norms but was now a Vegas act on autopilot. But over three seasons, Einbinder has proved herself a worthy co-lead.

By this point, the show can go as deep with Einbinder's character as it does with Smart's. That shift has only worked because of Einbinder's ability—mostly learned on the fly—to toggle between zingers so dry they're in need of aloe and emotive, open-faced vulnerability that makes it clear that punchlines can bruise. Already she's a three-time Emmy nominee for outstanding supporting actress in a comedy series—not bad for a newbie's first role.

"She had just such amazing instincts from the get-go," Smart tells me. Now, though, Smart detects a new confidence in her costar. During the first season, Smart remembers that even when Einbinder was consistently knocking it out of the park, she would consult with her, and they'd discuss scenes and go over jokes. These days? "She doesn't ask my advice as much as she used to," Smart says with a laugh.

All of a sudden, stand-up comedian Hannah Einbinder finds herself a true-blue thespian, charting her course through Hollywood. "This is all so insane," Einbinder tells me. "I just was like, Okay, I guess I'm a freaking actress now? Like, *dang*!"

AROUND THE TIME the show made its debut in 2021, a new strain of *hack* entered the cultural conversation—the nepo baby, a term for Hollywood scions reaping the benefits of DNA and inherited networks to gain a foothold in the industry. While use of the term is generally playful, it has also become a kind of Rorschach test for those kids.

From the start, the press zeroed in on the fact that Einbinder is the daughter of Laraine Newman, the iconic comic who helped found the Groundlings and was a member of the first-ever cast of *Saturday Night Live.*

For her part, Einbinder has long acknowledged the inherent advantages of having a mother who exposed her to the work of comics like Steve Martin (*Let's Get Small* was a big one), Maria Bamford, and Patton Oswalt very early on. And it's not like she advertised her lineage, either. "I didn't know who Hannah's mother was until about a year after I met her," the superstar comic Chelsea Handler, who hired Einbinder in 2019 to be her opening act, tells me in an email. "I find the whole nepo baby conversation silly. If one or both of your parents are entertainers, it's likely you will also catch the bug. It's called genetics."

But to hear Einbinder tell it, comedy wasn't so much a birthright as a survival mechanism—at least initially.

As a child, her love of the Kirsten Dunst classic *Bring It On* led her promptly to sign up for competitive cheerleading, eventually becoming team captain. Around that time in high school, she was diagnosed with ADHD and prescribed Adderall. Pairing that drug with idle time and an increasingly religious weed habit, she entered what she has described as her lost years, a period when she seemed closed off to the world.

It was only when she discovered comedy that the fog finally began to lift. At Chapman University, Einbinder landed and then nailed a spot opening for the comedian Nicole Byer; onstage, she found a calling and a new purpose, and threw herself into the craft with the same intensity she gave cheerleading.

Einbinder says she never really thought about what it would mean to make her own way in a comedy industry that her mom helped pioneer. "I think I just was sick," she tells me. "I was just obsessed with writing and the work itself. I had no concept of 'I am going to forge a path [of my own] and I'm going to do this.' It was just, where am I going tonight? I got a coffee shop job after college—I wasn't trying to work my way up some entertainment-industry thing. I was like, I just need a job where I'm free after whatever time so I can go do my set."

But there is one unavoidable reality of stand-up comedy: If you're not bringing the house down and making people laugh in that room, you're out the door.

"When you're at an open mic, no one knows who your parents are," says Sandy Honig, who came up with Einbinder in LA's comedy scene. "It really just was about getting up onstage—and I mean, she just destroys. She really can command an audience in a way that a lot of people can't. I think that speaks for itself."

Handler picked Einbinder to be her opening act after looking through a series of sets by female comics; she was immediately drawn to Einbinder's idiosyncratic voice. "She was such an oddball," Handler recalls. "She was very smart, very intentionally soft-spoken, and committed to her material."

That distinct style is on display in *Everything Must Go,* her debut stand-up special, directed by Honig. The topics—urban planning, botanical communism, bees pollinating, bees under the thrall of a "polyamorous monarchical tyrant"—aren't exactly your average Comedy Store fare.

"She's got her voice, and she has absolute unshakable confidence in it," says Smart. "A lot of comedians, they can seem very needy and desperate. If they're not doing well, they talk even faster and louder—she just sits back and lets the audience come to her."

Stephen Colbert first saw a clip of her stand-up in 2019 and gave Einbinder her network TV debut on his show the following year. "I liked how relaxed she seemed for such a young performer," he says in an email. "Some new performers are good but tight and sweaty. She was loose and cool."

At this point, Einbinder is unquestionably her own comedian. But every so often, she'll find herself back in the headlines as her mother's daughter. This past September, after she lost the Emmy for best supporting actress in a comedy to Liza Colón-Zayas of *The Bear,* the acclaimed if questionably "comedic" FX series, her mother went on a spirited multi-tweet rant about what she perceived as category fraud. "FUCK. THE. BEAR!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" Newman wrote in a since-deleted tweet, complete with 19 exclamation points. Later she posted, "I think the Bear is a great show but IMHO it's not a comedy—not even a dark comedy."

In an alternate universe, it could've passed without incident—just another passionate parent at a basketball game grumbling about the referee. But in this universe, Einbinder's mom is Laraine Newman, and in this universe, those tweets spurred a whole news cycle.

"I think moms shouldn't have Twitter," Einbinder cracks when I ask her about the incident. "They certainly shouldn't have a hundred thousand followers."

When it happened, Einbinder immediately thought of her friends on *The Bear*—Ayo Edebiri and Lionel Boyce, actors she's known for years. "I was just like, *Giiirl,*" she says.

"I don't think she understood is the truth…. She's 72. I was like, 'Girl, everybody can see that.' She was like, 'No, honey, just my followers can see it.' I was like, 'Girl, *no*.'" Initially, Einbinder tells me, she was upset, until she realized how bad Newman felt about the blunder.

"She was being a *mom,*" Einbinder explains. "And I know for a fact that she loves *The Bear*! She just loves me more."

WELL-MEANING MOM tweets aren't the only things Einbinder has had to confront in the spotlight. As her profile has risen, she's found herself fielding questions around her identity and gender expression, exploring the way she'd like to present herself to a growing audience. While she tends to dress in jeans and button-downs off duty, she enjoys playing the part of the fashionista at work. "The world's a stage, doll!" she says, Patti LuPone affect in her voice. "I mean, it's theater!"

On *Hacks,* Ava's uniform of Carhartt jackets and combat boots is often the butt of jokes—in boss Deborah's words, she dresses "like Rachel Maddow's mechanic." In real life, Einbinder has emerged as a red-carpet ingenue, frequently seen in Nicolas Ghesquière's Louis Vuitton, styled by Jamie Mizrahi—a favorite of superstars like Adele and Jennifer Lawrence.

"You can't just wear the merch from the fucking comedy club anymore," she cracks. "I looked like Adam Sandler before—and honestly still do."

Today, in fact, she's in full *Big Daddy*–era Sandler drag, wearing baggy jeans, a white tee, and an unbuttoned pinstripe shirt with black Sambas, and the icing on the cake—two *Brat* green hair clips holding that now-signature bob in place.

When she first started doing press, Einbinder largely wore suits—it's just what she felt comfortable in, she explains. But as the years have gone by, she's embraced a more glamorous, more femme persona on the carpet.

Under scrutiny, Einbinder, who identifies as bisexual, has found herself becoming firmer in her gender expression. "Having eyes on me and having folks demand answers to what I'm doing and what word I am has forced me to accept the liminal space," she says. "We live in a binary world. People really want to know that red means stop and green means go—and I'm yellow, baby. You know? Go slow or speed up. Whatever."

That embrace of the liminal bodes well in a role that often tasks her to telegraph complex, nuanced ideas around gender, age, and morality. "There's been kind of this idea that Deborah can do no wrong for the audience," says Aniello. "But I think that Hannah showing the pain of Ava changed that story a bit and changed the way people feel about both characters—they now find themselves rooting for Ava over Deborah, which seems like such a crazy reversal."

At the end of season three, a significant betrayal shifts the axis of the show. And more than anyone on the cast, it falls on Einbinder to communicate the gravity of that deception in a scene where she's startlingly good—collateral damage communicated in a few seconds. I tell Einbinder that watching her on *Hacks* is like watching Kelly Clarkson on that first season of *American Idol*—seeing someone realize, in real time, just how good they are.

"I didn't know I had that in me. I really didn't," she says. "I knew I had that pain, but I didn't know that I could channel that."

"She's in the moment," Smart tells me. "She's absolutely right there in whatever is happening. And it helps me to be better because you don't feel like there's anything else except what's going on between the two of us…. And so I lose any self-consciousness I might have about anything…. I don't feel that with a lot of people."

HOW DOES SOMEONE become a hack? It's a question the show returns to frequently, a kind of thesis statement that binds all the characters together. If Ava lucked out on her career because of fleeting internet fame and doesn't yet have the chops to deliver day in and day out, does that make her a hack? Despite Deborah's undeniable success, does doing the same material over and over again, because that's what her audience wants, make her a hack?

"A hack is someone who does the same thing over and over," Ava tells a fictional *New Yorker* reporter.

As Einbinder finds her place in the Hollywood firmament, she's thinking about that question. How do you keep doing what has brought you success without growing dull—or worse, ignorant?

Early in her career, performing comedy fed a need. In a speech she gave at a *Variety* event this year, Einbinder cited a quote widely attributed to Robin Williams: "I think the saddest people always try their hardest to make people happy because they know what it feels like to feel absolutely worthless and they don't want anyone else to feel like that."

"It rings true for me," she says. "I am lucky to have been able to dig myself out of a dark hole, but I understand that pain that he felt, and I understand what he needed out of performing, because I once needed that."

Now it's the dedication to the work itself that has Einbinder engaged and evolving. "Initially my drive to perform was based on my love of comedy but also my need to feel good," she says. "And I only felt good onstage—and sometimes I felt bad onstage, which was even worse. But that would only make me want to go back the next night because I needed a hit…. And as my self-esteem has grown, it has come to be like a community exercise. I love comedy, I love thinking of jokes. I don't try, it just is how I think."

Einbinder once needed comedy to have purpose—it gave her that, and plenty more. Now, though, she's looking at what else she can be. "[Robert Altman's] *3 Women* is a reference for a movie that Julia Fox and I want to star in," she tells me.

While stand-up will always be part of Einbinder, I tell her I can imagine her starring in something like Nicole Holofcener's *You Hurt My Feelings,* maybe even the Safdies' *Uncut Gems*. Dramedies that comment on the inherent ridiculousness of life while centering their characters' interiority.

With Fox and filmmaker Leah Rachel, Einbinder tells me, she's actually developing that dream project. "You can put there," she says with a laugh, "*investors welcome.*"

RAYMOND ANG *is* GQ*'s associate director of editorial operations.*

All clothing, subject's own.

hair by jerrod roberts at the wall group. makeup by jo strettell at walter schupfer management using hourglass cosmetics.

Calvin Klein

MEN OF THE YEAR 2024

SHABOOZEY THE BIG SHA-BANG

Shaboozey spent months at the tippy-top of the charts with a hit song about dealing with hard times the easy way: by hitting the bar. He sang on a couple songs with Beyoncé too. So we asked the one and only **SHANIA TWAIN** to help country's biggest new star make sense of his explosive year.

Photographs by **Tyrell Hampton** | Styled by **Brandon Tan**

DURING

a year when Kendrick Lamar and Drake went to war, *Brat* summer revived club classics, and Sabrina Carpenter redefined the humble espresso forever, the year's biggest hit came from the Virginia-born country singer Shaboozey, who snuck in like a dark horse, topped the charts, and leaves the year as perhaps the most exciting new discovery in music.

No song dominated 2024 more than "A Bar Song (Tipsy)," which recast J-Kwon's 2004 banger as the kind of ode to the curative powers of drinking that Hank Williams Jr. (or, for that matter, Hank Sr.) might have once sung. Beyond that, he also lent his gifts to Beyoncé's world-shifting *Cowboy Carter*—most notably on "Spaghettii," which also featured Black country music pioneer Linda Martell.

The great Shania Twain also knows something about sneaking in and stealing the show. In 1998, she gate-crashed a pop chart dominated by the likes of Mariah Carey and Will Smith by importing elements of classic rock, Europop, and dance into Nashville. *Come On Over,* released the year prior, is still the biggest-selling studio album by a solo female artist of all time and has gone on to influence generations of multi-genre crossover stars like Post Malone and Taylor Swift—and, of course, Shaboozey.

On the day "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" officially spent a 12th week at number one, *GQ* got Shaboozey and Twain together to explain why country is the genre of outsiders, bond over the therapeutic power of drinking songs, and talk about writing for pop's biggest superstars. —RAYMOND ANG

SHANIA TWAIN: You and I are from completely different time periods in the music industry, but you know a lot of *old* country—traditional, country-western country. What's one of the first country songs you ever heard?

SHABOOZEY: My dad was an immigrant here from Nigeria, but he was always talking about Kenny Rogers and Don Williams and Dolly Parton. I'm like four or five years old, and I'm like, Who are these people?

But when I was younger, definitely Kenny Rogers. My dad played a lot of *The Gambler.* But then I really fell in love and had my own journey a little bit later on in life. I started listening to more classic rock, and then I uncovered the Stones, Pink Floyd, and all these different people. And then just kept peeling back until I heard Bob Dylan. It all got kind of messy and mix-y.

TWAIN: Well, we have that in common. The household that I grew up in, my grandparents and my parents, they were into the same stuff you're talking about. It was Don Williams and Kitty Wells. [Her] song "[It Wasn't God Who Made] Honky Tonk Angels" was part of my very first repertoire. But I think one of the very first songs I loved the most, that hit me as a songwriter, was Bobbie Gentry's "Ode to Billy Joe." And I don't know if you ever heard of that one, but you got to hear it. Just storytellers.

SHABOOZEY: I think the storytelling and how honest [country music] was was what caught me. I definitely had struggles trying to find my identity—in everything. Especially being that my parents are Nigerian but I was born in Virginia. I didn't have the same cultural history as everybody else, whether that's people that immigrated from Europe or Asia or even Africa.

TWAIN: We're both very much outsiders in that sense.

SHABOOZEY: I just felt like that's what the country music I love is: people just telling their stories.

I love hip-hop too. When I was young, it was Lil Wayne, Usher, Nelly, and Ja Rule. And I realized all these people are telling *their* stories and they influenced me. And then I was like, Man, how do I tell my own story within this? And someone started playing guitar and I started singing, and I tried to keep it real. And then people were like, "Oh, you got a voice" and you're talking about real things that happened to you. Then they're like, "This is pretty similar to country."

TWAIN: It's *so* country. You're a storyteller. Our musical education comes so much from a wide range of music that we were influenced by—soul, R&B, folk, our grandparents' country, for me, bluegrass and that sort of thing. So once you mature, as a self-taught songwriter and artist, you're really a hybrid of all of these things. I mean, if I pick up a guitar and tell a story, that to me is country music. A good example is "I Will Always Love You." Whitney Houston made it a worldwide smash but it's actually a country song, by Dolly Parton.

SHABOOZEY: "A Bar Song" is almost the reverse of that. To take a song like J-Kwon's "Tipsy" and be like, oh, this is actually a country song—just to flip a couple of things and now it's a country song—it's cool to see. And that's now my biggest hit song. And Whitney Houston did that with Dolly. What really got me so inspired by country music is, I'm from Virginia. Virginia doesn't really have an identity. If you think of the people that come from Virginia—Pharrell is from Virginia, Missy Elliott and Timbaland and all these people are from Virginia, and they all have different, distinct sounds. And then Emmylou Harris went to my high school, and June Carter Cash and the Carter family, and Patsy Cline are also from Virginia. So I wanted to build a sound for where I'm from. I feel like New York has their thing and Atlanta has its thing and California has its sound, but Virginia didn't really have that.

TWAIN: In the end, as artists, we make music for listeners. And those listeners are going to have their own perception of what it is that we do. We don't really need to label it or spend too much energy focusing on what it is.

SHABOOZEY: I feel like it's so hard, because as a commercial artist, you want to be accepted in spaces. And country music has a stigmatization to it, obviously, which I've had to wrestle with a lot, going into Nashville. I love Nashville, I have so many friends. But recently, with all the success, it still feels kind of like, man, do they really like me? I mean even at the People's Choice Country Awards, I'm like, they're probably sitting there like, "When's the real country people coming?" So it kind of sucks. I internalize that all.

TWAIN: I don't want you to feel that way, as someone that's been around in the industry for a very, very long time. I mean, I'll always be an outsider to it, and I'm okay with that. It's okay.

SHABOOZEY: One of my friends, a folk artist who goes by the name Tré Burt, was explaining to me how the banjo came from West Africa, and how slaves actually started to share music and share culture and share ideas and all these different songs with indentured servants and people from Ireland who were also impoverished as well. And they were making these songs in the mountains, and that's kind of where country music started from. In essence, it's like nobody's music—it's everyone's music.

TWAIN: Yeah, it's very much a meld. The cowboy culture was something that I watched on TV. I loved Western movies. My dad being North American Indian, we would sit around as a family and we would watch the cowboys and Indians. And there was always this underlying tension of who the bad guys were. Is it the cowboys or the Indians? What you were saying about the poor mountain whites and the

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OPENING PAGES
jacket, shirt, pants, and tie
Bottega Veneta

hat
Stetson at Kemo Sabe

sunglasses
Selima Optique

pin
Bode

watch
Piaget

rings
(on both pinkies)
FoundRae

ring (on ring finger)
Eli Halili

→
shirt and jeans
Dolce & Gabbana

bolo tie
Boot Star

bracelets and ring
(on pinkie) from
Foundwell Vintage

ring
(on left ring finger)
David Yurman

ring
(on right ring finger)
Chopard

vest and jeans
Phipps

vintage shirt
Polo Ralph Lauren from the Society Archive

boots
Savas

watch
Piaget

necklace from
Foundwell Vintage

rings
(on both pinkies)
FoundRae

ring (on ring finger)
Eli Halili

skin by lisa-raquel at see management using dior. barbering by ariel orruel. tailoring by ksenia golub. special thanks to desert 5 spot.

slaves and all the singing and the intermingling, funneling down a music that would be really America's storytelling music. And so I think we do belong there. That is our story. We are part of it.

TWAIN: How are you getting prepared for this tour?
SHABOOZEY: This is the first tour I've ever been on, and your agents are usually like, "We want to book you in small places to build your audience." Then you have a hit song that's been number one for 13 weeks, so you also have fans that are like, "You made my favorite song and my kids love you." It's weird.

TWAIN: Stepping stones are valuable, man. That's why I didn't tour at all for the first [few years of my career]. I had a diamond album but I said, I don't want to be out on the stage again until I have enough hits that I can do the whole show without doing one cover.

GQ: There's this proud tradition in country music of the drinking song—like "A Bar Song" and Shania's own "Giddy Up!" What are your favorite drinking songs?
TWAIN: Okay, if you're a songwriter and you write, "There's a tear in my beer cause I'm crying for you, dear." I mean, *come on.* That's like the ultimate. That's an actual country song [by Hank Williams Sr.] and it kills me.
SHABOOZEY: One I play a lot is "Drinking and Dreaming" by Waylon Jennings. I was looking at the lyrics again today, and it was just like, oh, this is the same [as my song]. Let's just forget about all this stuff we got going on at home and let's go to a place where we can just forget about it for a little bit.

TWAIN: A bar is also a contemplative place. Of course, it's about partying, too, but so many people sit down at the bar. I started singing in bars at the age of eight years old. So my whole view is very skewed because I was introduced to it so young. It's almost like the smell of the inside of a real honky-tonk bar is nested somewhere in the middle of my brain.

SHABOOZEY: It's so cool. It connects back to blue-collar American life. That's a staple in American culture, especially when you're getting off work. We talk about writing from a place of truth and trying to connect to the majority of Americans, and you seem to find a lot of people working a job. Going back to my childhood, my mom and my dad worked so much. I hated to see that. I was never around my parents, really, because of how much they were working. And have to crawl up the stairs after work, you know what I mean? I'm like, I don't want to do that.

TWAIN: Don't we learn a lot from others about what we don't want for ourselves? I'm from a small town too. I don't know how many people there are in your town.
SHABOOZEY: My small town's a commuter city. It's like 30, 40 minutes from DC, and you're kind of there to work for the government. There wasn't an entertainment industry. There wasn't people being creative. The only way I could have seen myself making it in music from where I'm from is *American Idol.* That was probably it.

TWAIN: Right. So the arts were not really part of the environment around you. But what about your parents? Were your parents musical?
SHABOOZEY: I don't know where [the music] came from. I wanted to be a novelist when I was a little kid. I read *Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potters* and all those fantasy novels. And I was like, wait, one person came up with all of this? They didn't need a $20 million budget to make it. They just picked up some paper and started coming up with stuff. Once I realized that you can create a bigger world than what is in your small town? Oh, it's game on.

TWAIN: *I'm getting out of here*—even if it's in my own head. I relate to this because I had quite a challenged upbringing. So I stretched my imagination like you wouldn't believe as a kid, for escapism. I'm like, I can leave this very moment and go anywhere I want with anyone.
SHABOOZEY: An artist isn't required to have the best vocal, be technically trained. We're just creative. This conversation makes me really, really emotional—we both share that need to escape, that need to be, like, *we need to get out of here.*

TWAIN: A lot of the talent is in seeing the vision happen. Materializing the vision is a different thing, but having the vision and creating and then changing it? It's like, sculpting it in your head.
SHABOOZEY: Yeah, I'm going to cry. [*Laughs*] Even when I wasn't a success.... Everything I ever said would happen has happened. And even when things seemed dark, we just trusted and had that vision—maybe delusion at some point.

GQ: You guys have also written for other artists. Obviously, Boozey had the great songs on *Cowboy Carter.* Shania, you wrote Britney Spears's "Don't Let Me Be the Last to Know." How different is the process of writing for other people?
SHABOOZEY: Technically, Beyoncé didn't end up taking the ones I cut for her to sing, but they're still some of my favorite songs ever. Being on the album was really cool. When I was listening to "Spaghettii," I heard it and I was like, okay, Beyoncé is rapping. I'm not too sure what she wants me to do on this or where I'm going to fit in on this song. This isn't really my style, my vibe. [But] it's Beyoncé. I can't say no. And then the song switched up to this very dark outlaw [thing], and I was like, I know exactly what to do. When I was done, me and the engineer looked at each other. We do this thing where we're like, "Ooh," this face when you're like, "Yo, that was crazy sick." And I was like, "Yeah, Beyoncé's going to hear this and be like, This is fire." And I saw her two days ago and she confirmed. She was like, "Wait, what you did on 'Spaghettii'? Fire."

TWAIN: That's a great one. Nobody can top that.
SHABOOZEY: You wrote for Britney Spears, you can top that.

TWAIN: I haven't ever written specifically for other artists. I've recorded all my own writing and I want to just not write for myself. I did write a song for Céline Dion years ago, called "From This Moment On," but then my producer at the time wanted me to record it, and it's one of my biggest songs. So I guess it's better that I did it, but I would love to have had her record it. I just wrote it with her in mind.

I'd love to do more of that. I just feel writing for myself is kind of limiting because it's my voice, it's my range, it's my style. Writing for other voices opens up my world as a writer.
SHABOOZEY: They're going to take it. I always think that certain people that write a song, you have to take the song. You're one of those people. You can write a song any way you want right now, they have to take it. It's a Shania Twain song.

TWAIN: Okay. Well I'm going to write a song for Shaboozey now.
SHABOOZEY: You should.

TWAIN: I'll send one your way.

Shania Twain is the best-selling female artist in the history of country music.

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work of its players—and the players are uniquely unified in all of sports. "Nothing exists on its own," Ogwumike, who has served as WNBPA president since 2016, said. "There's no league without the players, and there's no union without the players."

Beginning in 2016, when WNBA teams helped lead the way in pro sports' protests against police brutality, the players began to more strategically deploy their political and bargaining power. "The player leadership started a WhatsApp chat," Terri Carmichael Jackson, the WNBPA's executive director, remembered. Jackson considers it a turning point for the players association. "That's when I could show them tangibly, this is what collective voice looks like." Two years later, they opted out of the existing collective bargaining agreement (CBA) for the first time in union history, setting up a groundbreaking 2020 contract that included, among other things, higher salaries, improved travel and childcare benefits, and support for career planning once players hang up their sneakers.

The growth that began in the Wubble season coincided with an increasingly politically active workforce. In 2020 the WNBA dedicated its season to the memory of Breonna Taylor, a victim of police violence, and the PA organized a campaign to elect the progressive candidate Raphael Warnock over Kelly Loeffler (then a co-owner of the WNBA's Atlanta Dream) in a crucial Georgia Senate runoff.

While W players' power has never been higher, their salaries are still limited by that CBA. This became a huge sticking point around the start of the season, as new fans were outraged to learn that 2024's top draft picks, for example, would be limited to a $76,535 first-year salary. League salaries currently max out at about $240,000, and attempts to improve conditions for players sometimes raise league scrutiny: A deal the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority struck with Aces players that yielded $100,000 for each team member was the subject of a league investigation this season. The WNBA made one huge upgrade in May by seeding a new charter-flight program with $50 million, ending years of six-foot-plus stars squeezing into premium economy, if not getting stranded overnight in airports.

"Everyone is so into women's sports," Collier said. Including basketball, women's elite sports were projected to surpass $1 billion in revenue in 2024 for the first time ever. And yet sometimes, she said, "it feels like everyone but the women in the sports are profiting off of it."

While the league's salary structure will remain intact until their next contract negotiation (which could come as soon as 2025), their off-court compensation has never seen more upside. Collier told me that she makes two to three times her salary, which is just north of $200,000, in marketing and endorsement deals; that multiple is likely even higher for players like New York Liberty stars Breanna Stewart and Sabrina Ionescu, or A'ja Wilson, all of whom have signature shoe deals.

It amounts to a wholesale shift in mindset. "When I think back on the rooms I've been in in business for so long in women's sports, the question was, *How do we not lose money?*" Smith said. "Which is just such a backward way to approach anything, instead of: *How do we* make *money on this?*"

Now, Smith said, "it feels different. There's a few reasons. The first is money." She laughed, almost apologetically. "The money behind this now, you can't deny. Nobody's going to let it fail. It's not *if* anymore, it's *how quickly*."

"The second is consumers. It's *us*," she said. "The buying power now exists within people who are genuine supporters."

I knew what she meant, even if I felt a little deadened by her framing it in the clinical terms of consumer power. It has been difficult to align the unadulterated joy I feel from following women's basketball with the simple fact of its growing commercial might. From inside the arena, much of the explosive growth has felt invigorating, while other parts have felt, on the one hand, charged and polarizing, and, on the other, so…branded. I want to see investment in women's sports not because of how capital-I *important* it is to invest in women's sports, but because that's just what we do. I want to evolve past the baseline expectation that "everyone watches women's sports," as the now ubiquitous T-shirt says, to a more specific, informed kind of fandom—one that takes the level of play as seriously as it deserves. But we're not there yet. This is, I suppose, the price of admission to the mainstream.

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LIKE MOST WOMEN athletes, WNBA players have always been enthusiastic participants in the seemingly unending process of improving their sport and their standing in the world. And so it has felt doubly cruel that, at this joyful moment, its players are once again shouldering much of the burden of making things better for themselves and educating the public about their worth and safety, all in addition to playing world-class basketball.

Because, as the W's landmark season rolled on, the discourse around the league began to sour. We may have evolved slightly past the toxic commenter's claim that professional women athletes belong in the kitchen, but we have entered a new era that is even more noxious. Because Clark is white and Reese is Black, their rivalry, which began in college, has long attracted ham-fisted racial analysis. This year, much of the pearl clutching around Clark concerned the idea that she was being targeted with hard fouls by Black WNBA players jealous of her outsized popularity. As bad-faith opportunists have rushed to the latest culture war, the W has had to adapt. "Our game was held back for a very, very long time, and now we are bursting at the seams," Staley said in Phoenix. "This should've been a steady climb." Instead, with the sudden influx, "we're skeptical. *Do we let this company in?* You should've jumped on board a long time ago."

At the start of the season, Stephen A. Smith had a meltdown on *First Take* when Monica McNutt called out the program's historical lack of WNBA coverage, and Pat McAfee, for reasons I'm not even sure he fully understood, called Caitlin Clark a "white bitch for the Indiana team" on his own ESPN show. By week two, Indiana's Aliyah Boston had deleted her X account, saying later on that online trolls "forget that we're human"; in June, after Chicago's Chennedy Carter delivered Clark a hard foul, she and her teammates were harassed by a man outside their hotel in DC.

Engelbert didn't help things when, in a TV appearance in September, she whiffed on a softball question about how the league was dealing with player harassment in the age of Clark and Reese, when race or sexuality is "introduced into the conversation." Engelbert, instead of condemning the issue, compared the situation to the NBA's fruitful Larry Bird–and–Magic Johnson rivalry in the '80s (itself a not-uncomplicated duel pitting a white player against a Black one): "That's what makes people watch." In a letter to players later that week, Engelbert apologized formally: "I regret that I didn't express, in a clear and definitive way, condemnation of the hateful speech that is all too often directed at WNBA players on social media." She also contacted some players individually; Stewart and Collier both told me they'd heard from her following the interview.

"It's what you want from your commissioner, to own it and realize that she made a mistake," Stewart said. "We let her know these things need to be addressed right away because we have zero tolerance for them. And it starts with you at the top."

The players will also likely be keeping a close watch on coaching hires this offseason. Chicago's Teresa Weatherspoon and Atlanta's Tanisha Wright were both fired at the end of their teams' seasons, leaving Seattle's Noelle Quinn the only Black head coach in the league. (In October, the expansion Valkyries introduced Aces assistant Natalie Nakase as their inaugural head coach, making her the first Asian American head coach in W history.) And while the league has had Black presidents before, a former WNBA player hasn't served as president or commissioner; whenever Engelbert leaves the job, Ogwumike (whom Jackson calls "the most respected voice in women's basketball") would instantly be a top candidate for that role.

"When you have a head coach that's a former player, they know the player's perspective most because they've been there," Stewart told me. "And that can be true as well for the commissioner, because you've lived and breathed it. You know what needs to be better."

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IF 2024 HAS felt like a tear in the fabric, the next few years will register more as a seismic shift. The year 2026 is, in Stewart's words, "when everything seems to be happening." By then, the league will have added three expansion teams, amounting to at least 36 new roster spots, or a remarkable 25 percent increase. (Engelbert wants to add a 16th franchise by

2028, finally getting the league back to its early 2000s fighting weight.) Barring a lockout, the WNBPA and the league will by then have negotiated and agreed to a new CBA, which could include, among other things, a higher salary cap, a plan for revenue sharing, more roster spots, a pension plan for retired players, and untold other gains the players are currently dreaming up in regular committee meetings.

More thrillingly, 2026 is projected to deliver the most chaotic free agency period in the history of the sport. For the past few years, veteran players have been prepping for the potential benefits of a new CBA by signing shorter contracts that tee them up for new deals under a growing salary cap; not including players on rookie contracts, there are currently only two players in the league with deals past 2025.

Team owners have been preparing for this open market, too. Since the Aces opened their practice facility in 2023—the first ever built for the sole use of a WNBA team—five other franchises have opened, broken ground on, or announced plans to build dedicated practice facilities of their own, and all three of the announced expansion teams have plans to do the same. These facilities represent a revolutionary step forward; veteran players and alumni simply never had access to the kind of recovery resources or one-on-one training that incoming rookies will now get from day one. "All our owners want to win a championship," Engelbert said. "So the more they can do to differentiate themselves, they will."

It's clear the players are already thinking outside of the box. This winter, Collier and Stewart are launching a three-on-three league called Unrivaled, which will keep 30 of the best players in the world Stateside during the off-season. Providing players equity, Collier said, gives them "a chance to build their generational wealth. We have to plan for after our careers are done in basketball. The more options that we have, the better."

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WHEN JACKSON, the WNBPA's executive director, was hired in 2016, she remembers, the union's executive committee asked her where she saw the league 5 or 10 years down the road. She had prepared all of her answers ahead of time, but for this question she found herself going off script.

"There was so much conversation about how the NBPA and the NBA had structured things," she remembers. "My answer was, I hope we stop comparing ourselves to the NBA. I hope we see what we have."

That the W was different from the NBA didn't have to be a weakness—it could be a strength. "We're more nimble, we're more agile, our business is still growing, and there's still so many opportunities," Jackson said. "We haven't saturated the markets like some of the men's leagues have. There's so much room for us to move."

The league's stars know its future is, as ever, up to them. "We're at a point now where it's like, we want to tell you everything that we want," Breanna Stewart said. "And we're not hoping for it. We're asking for it."

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"it's just Big Me," Kendrick was also implicitly leaving Future out of the pantheon, Future points out: "I'm supposed to be the one who gets mad; I'm still confused about that."

"Nobody cares about what I think," Future continues, breaking into a laugh. "That's what was so fucked up about the shit. To the point where I'm so player that I ain't even said anything to the public about how I feel about it. Like, why is everybody mad when he was talking about *me* on *my* song? So y'all just forgot about me, I ain't part of this Big Three, I'm nobody on my song, man," he says with faux self-deprecation. "If I didn't get mad, *nobody* should have gotten mad! If I would have been really mad about it and I made something out of it, then someone else could be like, *Oh, I can make something else about it*."

As for whether he's cool with any and all the parties involved, Future shrugs. "Yeah. Who I'm not cool with? Because I ain't got nothing to be mad about. Find something I should be mad at them about, then I guess I'll get mad."

It's as elliptical as I expected Future to be about this, but it's also a very good point—of all the enemies Drake reserved bars for across his handful of diss songs, his most notable mention of Future is about how the idea of beefing with him is nauseating, before shifting blame on Metro for his involvement. And while Drake recently unfollowed a number of high-profile accounts on his Instagram, including those of LeBron James and DeMar DeRozan (both of whom were at Kendrick's "Pop Out" concert this past Juneteenth), he still follows Future—even after everything.

"Got no reason to be mad at nobody," Future says, shrugging again. "I just told you, I'm chilling. Do I sound like I'm mad at anybody?"

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FUTURE'S RIGHT ABOUT one thing—he absolutely should be in any and all "best out" conversations. In the past two years he's relentlessly pursued technical innovation, pushing boundaries on what a scene-stealing verse can be: experimenting with aggressive double-time flows, working whistles into his rhyme scheme, or dropping a song like *Mixtape Pluto*'s "Plutoski," where he seems to intentionally lose his train of thought and mumble-grunt his way through. In another rapper's hands, it would sound like a leaked reference track. With Future, it's avant-garde.

This year alone he gave us three projects that showcase three distinct styles in his arsenal: commercial rap bangers like on his first Metro album; experimental singing that dances across the spectrum of pop and R&B on the second; and the grimy reset that was *Mixtape Pluto*. As he, Wheezy, Eric the engineer, and 2Fly sit in the studio loosely plotting another project that would have smoother vibes than *MP,* I think back to Jay-Z's bar comparing the struggles of maintaining a consistent discography to solving one face of a Rubik's Cube: "Every album's a color, but I fuck up the other color."

Future is, at least in this moment, somehow making it all work—even if some of the faces of his cube are still jumbled. In casual conversation during our time in Paris, he expressed feeling somewhat trapped by the Toxic King title that rap fans anointed him with way back when. It's been 10 years now since *Honest,* but Future still seems disappointed by the way that album was received. If he wanted to switch up again, would his fans reject him? Or has he given them enough material over the past decade to assure them that he can always go back to the modes they love most whenever he wants?

"I was too diverse on *Honest,* I did that album way too early," Future suggests when I circle back to his Paris comments in Miami. "But ain't nothing too early. Everything now that's paying off, it's like, you can't say that wasn't worth it. I can't look back at certain moments and be like, *I should have did it like this*, because I never did it for money. I was doing it because that shit's fun."

"I don't think I'm toxic," he continues. "I think I'm too honest. Like I'm *too* truthful. Like I'm not sitting there lying, misleading [women]. *That's* toxic to me. 'Why didn't you come home?' I haven't heard that in a *looong* time, at least 10 years. I'm just slanging P. All it is is about having an understanding [with the women] of my life."

It's the statement of a man fully committed to his brand; in its own way, so is *Mixtape Pluto,* from its title on in. But it's hard not to notice that the music Future seems most excited about making these days comes from a different aesthetic place. "I feel like he raps just because he can," Metro says, suggesting that experimental, weirdly melodic songs like "Drink N Dance" are "a little more where his heart's at."

It's unsurprising to hear Future describe the spacey, emotive, largely sung-not-rapped *HNDRXX* as "my favorite album I ever made." And yet, he says, to ever truly make a genuine sequel, he'd have to be in love again. Until he tracks down the passcode-worthy Parisian woman, there's no telling which Future we'll get next or when—he could cool off or just as easily do something insane and try and go for a four-peat before December 31.

Metro, meanwhile, is looking to his beloved WWE as inspiration for his next arc. "So now it's like, how do you bounce back from a heel turn? Which is cool. I make a lot of my best stuff when I'm going through some type of adversity. Instead of sitting around complaining, it's like, I'm fixing to go to the studio, and make the hardest albums and look at you n-ggas like…." Metro drops his cool demeanor to put on a dead glare. Bless whoever he doesn't trust next.

FRAZIER THARPE *is* GQ*'s senior associate editor.*

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Johnson's early forays into Hollywood were massively successful; thanks to his prior fame as a wrestler, he is the rare actor to basically begin, as he did in *The Scorpion King* (2002), in leading parts. But Johnson likes to tell a story about a time, not long after this, when the first blush of success had worn off and he was finding himself increasingly relegated to family movies and stuff that obviously wasn't working. He surveyed the landscape, noted who was at the top of it. And he went to his agents and said, despite whatever recent setbacks he'd experienced, he had an idea, or simply an ambition: He wanted to have the career of George Clooney or Will Smith. But bigger, perhaps, or better. When his agents seemed skeptical of this plan, he found new agents; he has been at the top or near the top of Hollywood ever since.

Ask him about this story now and he seems torn between pride and embarrassment. "That was the idea back then," Johnson acknowledges. He did think: "I could be bigger. And I mean that respectfully. But also maybe do things differently, because there's no blueprint, I feel like, for a guy like me, who looks like me. But I feel now looking back on the career.... Bigger than Will, bigger than George? I think the declaration is just: different."

Kasdan says that these days, Johnson is maybe the most difficult person to recast in Hollywood. If he says no, or needs to be replaced, there is no second option. "There's no one," Kasdan says. "There's not a next guy you go to, really. People do, obviously, but it's no longer the same thing if it isn't him." Bergman, the Disney co-chairman, calls Johnson "one of a kind."

Johnson is open about how he built what he built. His level of calculation and strategy is rare even for a leading man. Johnson says he used to pick release dates before he'd even shot movies, a role typically reserved for executives, who are paid to imagine when a movie might have the biggest impact. But Johnson—whose supernatural connection with his own audience dates back to his days in the WWE—found that he had a talent for knowing not just the projects his fans had a particular hunger for but also for the times they might be hungriest. "So the date is Christmas, X year," he says. "Year and a half, two years before that: 'There's our date.' Now here comes the film. Now we work backwards from there. And I found myself doing that for years, actually. And it worked and it served me back then because it helped build my career."

Johnson was analytical and rigorous about what he would and wouldn't do onscreen. "I had this conceit and I idealized what my career should be," Johnson says. The conceit was: "Audience first. Let's take care of the audience first. So I get a piece of material, I'd look at it and think, Okay, does this have four-quadrant capability and opportunity? Are audiences going to like seeing me in this role?" So, inevitably, Johnson went big and broad and stayed there.

Until recently, anyway. *Red One* and *Moana 2* may still be four-quadrant films—films that appeal to all ages, and all genders, of potential moviegoers—but *The Smashing Machine* is decidedly not. "It was also an opportunity for me, I realized, to stretch myself in ways that I hadn't been stretched yet," Johnson says. "And also challenge myself in ways that I hadn't been challenged."

Benny Safdie says that when he met Johnson, he could see that it was possible for him to play Mark Kerr, despite there not being a ton of evidence for it in Johnson's past film work, in part because of how open and transparent Johnson is about his own emotions. Like Kerr, Johnson has experienced depression in his life. Growing up the way he did, Johnson says, "I didn't have anybody to turn to. I didn't have a mentor, I didn't have a big brother. So it was like, Oh, I need to figure all this shit out on my own. So you figure out the shit on your own, and then the shit you don't figure out, well, guess where it goes?" Johnson points toward somewhere deep inside his rib cage: "In there."

"You really understand the fears, the love, the sadness, the happiness," Safdie says. "If somebody's open to doing that and talking about that stuff, then they're going to be able to give a great performance. Because of how physically strong he is, I don't know if a lot of people give him that opportunity."

For most of his career, Johnson has been careful to separate his personal story, and all the things he went through as a kid and an adult trying to find his way, from his onscreen and industry presence, which has tended toward the cheerful and the indomitable. Johnson's philosophy was: "Let me work out my own shit. Money ain't growing on trees, and if you pay good money to come see a film, let me make sure that you enjoy yourself."

Johnson is not taking "enjoy yourself" entirely off the table. But he says it was illuminating, with *The Smashing Machine,* to allow a different kind of expression—maybe a more personal one—to creep into his art. "You start to realize that not only is it okay, but also if it fits the material, then it's important," Johnson says.

A few years ago, Johnson told *Rolling Stone*, "No one's going to see me play a borderline psychopath suffering from depression. I have friends I admire, Oscar winners, who approach our craft with the idea of 'Sometimes it comes out a little darker, and nobody will see it, but it's for me.' Great. But I have other things I can do for me."

When I read that quote to Johnson now, as the two of us sit on his porch, he says, "I don't know who the fuck *that guy* is."

Do you feel like you've changed your mind?

"I feel like I've evolved and grown," Johnson says. "What's evolved and changed, and I mean this respectfully because I love people, is it's got to be for me."

Do you think this will change the kind of projects you do going forward?

"A hundred percent. Now not to say that 'Oh, there's no more big movies.' Because the big movies are fun and there's a place for them in our business for a lot of families and people around the world to enjoy them. But there's also a place for me, in my career, where the material is deeper, it allows me to sink my teeth into something deeper, richer."

Normally, Emily Blunt says, Johnson is "someone who has to be on display. He's someone who has to give the appearance of invincibility and someone who is immune to struggles, someone who can cope." *The Smashing Machine* was an opportunity for Johnson to get away from all that. "I look what I look like," Johnson says. "I am what I am. There is no: 'Oh, Rock is just gonna disappear.' You know what I mean? However, to be able to do that in *Smashing Machine,* with the greatest of makeup artists—in a way, it was really freeing for me."

Safdie tells a story about shooting a scene set at a fair with a lot of extras. "It was just funny because I remember him walking around," Safdie says, "and you'd hear people saying, 'When's The Rock going to get here? I wonder when he's going to get here.' You'd hear all these people talking, and meanwhile he's walking amongst them."

It was a whole new way of being in the world for Johnson. "It's such a psychological thing here," he says, "but you know, from the moment I walk out of my house, I can't hide. But in a way, when I could disappear in a movie like *Smashing Machine,* and some of the other things now that we're developing, where it will allow me to disappear, with a Benny again or an A24—"

And you like that feeling of disappearing?

"Man, I love it," Johnson says. He gestures at the porch and the lake and the hills around us. "If you think about it, Zach, it's why I love being out here."

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AT SOME POINT, after Johnson inquires about one of my tattoos ("Can I ask you something? Tell me about the three bars"), congratulates my dad on finishing his career ("He's going to love seeing this—after a great career in medicine!"), and at one point watches my physical movements so closely he (correctly) diagnoses me, just by eye, as a golfer ("What do you love about golf?"), I feel compelled to ask: *How are you like this? Where does that come from?*

Johnson answers this one easily. "My mom. Yeah, my mom. She'll see this and automatically become your biggest fan. True story. Because like, 'Oh, you, you met my son.' She's my biggest fan. 'You're gonna do a story about my son.' So now she's *your* biggest fan." His mother has always been sweet and also "tough as nails," Johnson says. "The kindest soul, even through bad weather and damage and all the stuff that she went through. Always kind."

Johnson says he's pretty much always been this way, and people around him say the same. "I don't know if I've known anyone to have gone through so much struggle," Blunt says, "and to have come out the other side and been able to put the bag of bricks down and not let it affect how he treats other people."

In decades of public life, most celebrities will at some point wander into a scandal,

real or manufactured. But it took all the way until 2024 for Johnson to meaningfully find one. Earlier this year, the online trade publication The Wrap published a piece alleging that Johnson was chronically late to the set of *Red One,* frustrating his fellow cast and crew, and costing the production what The Wrap suggested was a considerable amount of money. The piece also alleged, as Johnson helpfully supplies to me himself, that "I pee in a bottle" while working. A beat. "Yeah. That happens."

What about the "late" part of that story?

"Yeah, that happens too," Johnson says. "But not that amount, by the way. That was a bananas amount. That's crazy. Ridiculous."

Johnson says that overall the controversy was "bullshit." Kasdan, who directed *Red One,* tells me that Johnson "never missed a day of work ever. He has a lot going on. He can be late sometimes, but such is Hollywood—that's the case with everybody. Honestly, I've made three big movies with him. I've never seen him be anything but great to every single person on the set."

Chris Evans, Johnson's costar on the film, also said the description of Johnson did not accord with his experience with the actor. "In terms of the guy that I saw, compared to some of the things I've seen on other movies with other actors who are not only not conscious of other people's time and efforts, but they're unpredictable? I found Dwayne to be—we all know exactly what he's going to do when he's going to do it."

Evans acknowledged that Johnson would work out in the morning before coming to set. "But this is something that the producers, the director, and it's all his team, so they all know this. So it's all basic. It's not like he's late unexpectedly, and I wouldn't even call it late. He comes in slightly later on certain mornings, but it's part of the plan. It's worked into the schedules and everyone knows it, so he shows up when he's scheduled to show up."

Johnson prides himself on his directness. He's being direct right now: Yes, he was sometimes late. Yes, he peed in bottles on set. He believes in taking accountability—for what he is accountable for, anyway. "I've said a thousand times: 'Hey, I'm here. Come and ask me. And I'll tell you the truth.'"

Evans tells a more cheerful story from the set of *Red One.* On many movie productions there is something called Five-Dollar Fridays, in which the cast and crew buy raffle tickets and at the end of the day they pull someone's name out. Actors are not generally in the running, but they are expected to contribute. Anyway there was a day—"I mean Dwayne did it all the time," Evans says, "but there was one day, and I'm really not exaggerating about this. I forget what the number was. The pot was up to four or five grand or something, and before they pulled the name out, Dwayne said, 'What's the pot at right now?' And someone said, 'I don't know, four grand.' And he said, 'Let's call it 20.' And they pulled out a name and whoever won was losing it."

Then, Evans says, "Dwayne said, 'You know what? Should we do it again? How about 30 this time?' Everyone goes nuts. And then he says, 'You know what? How about one more?' And it was 50. I think on one Friday, Dwayne gave away something like close to a hundred thousand dollars."

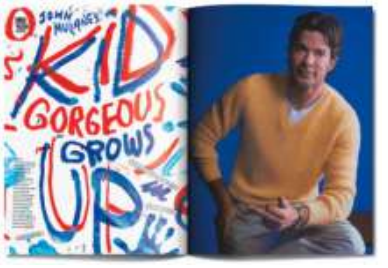
"I WANT TO SHOW YOU a spot," Johnson says on his porch. "Before it's all done, I'm going to show you a spot."

He disappears for a bit, and when he returns, it's on his Kubota four-wheeler. I get on board. The engine is loud and Johnson drives the cart fast, away from his house and the two different camera crews filming us. First, he wants to show me his gym, in a converted building just down the road, with an open side that looks out over the property. Inside are free weights and 20 or 30 machines, pristine, all of specific and brutal purpose. Johnson shows this place to me like it's a great treasure, a place of wonder and amazement. He's here a couple hours a day at least, he says. You can tell he's happy just stopping by, being in the room. This is the place that makes him happiest, he says: the machines, the view, the loss of self.

But the spot he actually wanted to show me is farther on, up a grassy hill, at the high point of the property. He says he comes up here at sunset, with a drink in his hand. Down below us are Mana Lake and the green fields. We look out farther, at the hills the sun reflects off of when it goes down. He does not switch off the four-wheeler, and it noisily shakes beneath us. In a few days, he says, he's due on set again, to begin shooting the live-action version of *Moana*. Who knows when he'll get back to this place again. He says another thing too—I think it's about how peaceful it is here, but I can't hear it over the roar of the cart's engine.

ZACH BARON *is* GQ*'s senior special projects editor.*

JOHN MULANEY



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belt, a place where, legendarily, "marriage isn't a word, it's a sentence.")

The whole thing was a lesson in the ruthlessness of appearances: Take away the suit, the haircut, all the other affects of a former altar boy, and perhaps more people would have noticed that Mulaney's act was as drug soaked as a 1970s Stones record. The very first track of his first comedy album was titled "Blacking Out and Making Money." Surely, there was a kind of willful blindness at work.

What he says about it is this: "I very much tried to tell everyone."

But wasn't he also trying to hide his darker tendencies, I ask. Didn't he make a habit of telling us exactly how harmless he was, just in case our first impressions weren't convincing enough? From *The Comeback Kid:* "I'm so open and vulnerable, I look like a doll that you point out molestation on." From *New in Town:* "I look like I was just sitting in a room in a chair eating saltines for, like, 28 years."

"What I said," he interrupts me to say, "is that I *look* harmless."

A few years into his career, Mulaney had the nagging thought that he wished he'd started out with a stage name. "I don't like when they say the same name that I had when I was 10. I don't always like reading that name out there," he says. "I wonder if it's nice, when you see 'so-and-so sucks,' you go, 'That's not me, actually.' I always wondered if that helped performers be like, 'I'm not Dean Martin. So be mad at *that thing* all you want.'"

I say that it sounds like another way to insist that the person who is on stage performing is not actually him.

"Except, and this is the problem," he says. "That is also the person who is the *most* me."

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OLIVIA MUNN'S FAVORITE story about Mulaney and his father, Charles W. Mulaney Jr., involves John, at seven or eight, begging to take his father's old briefcase to use as a school bag. "I said, 'Dude, did all the kids make fun of you?'" she says. "And he said, 'No. The next day they all had them too.'"

The elder Mulaney, a corporate lawyer, is the other persona who runs through Mulaney's work, a formidable embodiment of adult responsibility that Mulaney simultaneously idolizes and resents. The classic Charles story, from *The Comeback Kid,* involves taking the family through a McDonald's drive-through on a road trip, ordering a single black coffee for himself, and driving on. When Mulaney first told his father that he wanted to be a stand-up comedian, Charles's response was confusion: "Best-case scenario, you're like what, Steve Martin?"

Mulaney says his father's attitude has since evolved. "I think he enjoyed seeing, 'Oh, it's a thing people do respect,' which was fun for me to watch. I didn't need them to suddenly become stage parents or love everything I say or even think that comedy's important, or some shit. I don't need that," he says.

Either way, it's another data point about suits—i.e., why putting one on to go to work might have had particular appeal for this particular comedian. And then there's what Munn says Mulaney told her, shortly after they decided to have their first baby together: "He said, 'I want to come home and wear a suit every day. I want him to see his father

come in and wear a suit and be proud of how he presents himself to the world.'"

The day after exploring Little Saigon, we are at Mulaney and Munn's new house in Orange County. There are a few extra couches standing around, but otherwise the family seems to be settling in to their new digs nicely. Munn is feeding Méi a bottle. Malcolm rolls around in front of *Inside Out* before dragging himself away to join the adults at the table. Miss Kim is getting great pleasure out of cutting up a durian, the notoriously stinky fruit, which she picked up at the grocery near Asian Garden Mall, and watching the family's range of reactions from intrigued to disgusted.

Mulaney and Munn had met just once (at Seth Meyers's 2013 wedding) before reconnecting in early 2021. Mulaney had left rehab and was casting around for a new place to live in New York. Munn referred him to a friend; he sent thanks. The ensuing relationship, such as it was, was brief. If the tabloids thought they had a scoop about them dating, the joke was on them, because it was never true: They were just having a baby.

> What if what you were saying was really confessional and had an edge to it, but you kept selling it with this **big showbizzy energy.** How big can you sell **weird and specific?**

"It wasn't anything close to 'dating,'" Munn says. "I barely knew him." Still, when she told Mulaney she was pregnant, she says, he was immediately eager for her to have the baby. "It wasn't necessarily 'We're going to be married and live together' or any of that, but it was 'I will be involved in some way.'" Munn assumed they would co-parent. For most of the pregnancy, she lived in LA while Mulaney was in New York. Every few weeks they would talk or he would visit.

Mulaney can seem weary, if not a little irritated, to be still talking about his drug problems. After all, it's been four years since his intervention and another several years of talking about it in the material that grew into *Baby J*. But one of the unintended consequences of his "just jokes" strategy in that special may have been leaving an empty space in the public mind about where the *suffering* took place.

From our point of view, one moment he was clean and the next time we saw him he was…clean! And being pretty funny about it. Even the notorious *GQ* interview that Mulaney ended the show reading from, saying he had no memory of doing it, turned out to be pretty good! Mulaney breaks down the legal doctrine governing parody. He comes up with a good idea for a talk show interviewing old people. He makes a poignant point about COVID increasing compassion and ends on a good joke. If rock bottom is eating Froot Loops while giving sparkling quotes, one might think, I'll take it.

Mulaney politely but firmly makes it clear that this is very stupid. He tells a story about doing so much cocaine in his New York apartment one night that he was afraid he would die, but also felt unable to go to the urgent care next door. "I left the door to my apartment open. I can't explain the logic, but I was going to hit the door buzzer and tell the doorman to run and get the paramedics. I think I was worried I wouldn't be able to dial and explain, and I didn't want them to have to break the door down. I just sat on the rug and slowly came down. And I thought, Okay, this is insane. I'm going to totally slow down. That was like a Tuesday. And Thursday night, I did it again."

In the years since, he has been asked to participate in several other people's interventions, and he finds himself having to manage the expectations of the interveners. "I'm not saying don't do it, but define your goals here," he tells them. The important thing, in the moment, is to simply stop the person from dying. "But that will not immediately mean that you like them again right away, or that they are okay with you."

Munn fills in some more of the picture of Mulaney's own post-rehab period. "It was like watching a man in a tsunami," she says. "I was watching someone newly sober, at the edge of a cliff, and I didn't know him well enough to help him." He told her that he was afraid he would relapse. The troubles, though, never seemed to be about the coming baby. "That's the one thing that made him seem light and happy. I remember he was really excited to tell his parents."

Occasionally, she would go to see him perform. "In my head, I'm thinking, I don't know really what's happening with this guy. It feels pretty shaky," she says. "But then I would see him at the Troubadour and be like, 'Man, he's on fire. He's just that phenomenal.'"

When she was about six months pregnant, Munn says, she staged a mini-intervention of her own, getting more involved in his recovery but still not sure what shape the relationship would take. The two agreed that Munn would give him random drug tests, a ritual they still practice. "It's like a relief," he says. "I like to be able to not even have that be a question in her or anyone else's mind. Something about peeing in that cup is like, I'm walking this walk. It gives me confidence."

It was only two months before Malcolm was born that the two decided that they would attempt to raise him as a couple.

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IT AMUSES MULANEY that Malcolm is growing up a California kid. "His hair curls in the California air," he says. "When we're in Chicago, he has straight little John Mulaney hair. Until my late 20s, *Malibu* was a funny word to me. It was like saying *Zanzibar*."

He and Malcolm recently spent a day driving around Los Angeles, checking out potential soundstages for the new edition of *Everybody's in L.A.* The exact name is still being debated—there may be a "Live" thrown in there—but Mulaney says the rest of the show will be the same, down to Richard Kind acting as sidekick: a fascinating, purposefully messy attempt to illuminate his new home that is equal parts *Tonight Show*, Jerry Lewis telethon, and *City of Quartz*.

"Doing the show really made me enjoy LA," he says. "Something clicked where I was like, 'Oh, this feels like the future.' There's so much going on: aerospace, shipping, agriculture, industry. This Hollywood thing is pretty tiny." He says, Jonathan Gold, the late Pulitzer Prize–winning food critic and LA lifer who once set out to visit every restaurant along the 15.5-mile length of Pico Boulevard, was an inspiration.

Mulaney is intent on preserving the chaotic energy of the show's first six-episode run. "There's a quote I heard about Edward Hopper, that he was a great artist but he was only a good painter. But if he had been a better painter, he would have been a worse artist," he says. "I sort of feel like if we tried to make the show better, it would be worse."

How does one manage that?

"You go on instinct over data and recklessness over planning," he says.

Certainly, the show is part of the ongoing attempt of seeing how far one can scale weird. If there's a godfather of that artistic project, it's David Letterman, clearly one of Mulaney's kindred spirits. Backstage at *Everybody's in L.A.* in May, Letterman gave Mulaney some advice: "He said, 'When you're running The Weird Show, you have to be the least weird person on it,'" Mulaney says. "'Everybody's going to be saying, 'Let's do this,' and 'Let's do that,' and you're the one having to modulate the gas and brakes.'"

Maybe Mulaney's biggest achievement is making you believe that a 20th-century big-tent job like talk-show host still matters. And there are few he hasn't either done or been offered, at least that don't involve calling NFL games. He has been asked twice to host *The Daily Show,* once when Jon Stewart left and again more recently, but said no both times. Likewise to an offer to host the 2025 Oscars. It seems a given that at some point the question of sliding behind one of the networks' late-night desks will be on the table.

This December he will return to New York for a five-week run in Simon Rich's Broadway show, *All In: Comedy About Love*, alongside a cast of Kind, Armisen, Renée Elise Goldsberry, and others. The show is based on Rich's short stories, many of them first published in *The New Yorker,* and features music by Stephin Merritt of the Magnetic Fields and projections by cartoonist Emily Flake. Brooklyn may simply implode.

For now, though, a few more moments of domestic tranquility. Miss Kim brings over a plate of grilled-beef spring rolls and handmade Chinese boiled dumplings called sui jao. Méi is asleep, swaddled, on a cushion on Sam's lap. Miss Kim goes off to talk to one of her family members back home, a plastic container of durian under her arm.

"Maybe John Durian would have been a good stage name," Mulaney will text the next day. "It's a little like Bobby Darin and a little like John DeLorean." For now, America's favorite comedian trails after his mother-in-law, anxious above all for the latest news on the cataract surgery of one Ms. Hoan Nguyen of Oklahoma City. ⁘

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models. Now the clothes are getting lighter and so are the skin tones. And there was some voice inside of me that said, "You can't do that. You can't line up the models from darkest skin to lightest skin." And I sat there while the show was happening, debating it. *Can you do that? If you can't do that, why can't you do that?* And I couldn't find a reason why you can't do that. It made me aware that, as a white man from the American South, I am hypersensitive about anything racial.
That was the point. The point was for you to have a human connection to it. Using race to make a connection, without making it about race. It was about connecting to a color and seeing that you belong. At first, when you see the tone on tone—

You think race and your whole body tenses up.
And then, when you look, it's not racial at all. It's just making you feel like you belong, just like everybody else in the color wheel of existence. That was the point. I wanted everybody to feel welcome—because it's the prelude to the Olympics. And what is the Olympics?

"We Are the World," baby.
It's just humanity.

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Has the role at Vuitton changed the role that music plays in your life?
It has, but not in the way that you would assume.

Is it fair to assume there's less time for music?
More time.

How is that possible?
Because the Vuitton appointment has centralized me in a place where I can do more music. You've been to the music studio within the design studio [in Paris].

Yes.
And I got two other rooms. Before I was just taking music everywhere I went. Now music is at the heart of everything that I'm doing.

We were shooting Future and Metro Boomin last night in Miami.
Can you tell Future that I'm obsessed with *Mixtape Pluto*? Man, "Ski," "Plutoski," fucking "Aye Say Gang."

I like "Brazzier." But it struck me that Future is 40 years old, and he has had three number one albums in six months. Of street music. That's not supposed to happen in rap. You said to me that Jimmy Iovine once told you: "It's impossible to have a hit past 40." So I feel that this narrative around aging in hip-hop music is evolving.
Pusha was the first one to really talk about people aging gracefully in hip-hop. He been talking about it for years. Jay-Z did it really well.

Meanwhile, André 3000 has been talking for years about how it's impossible to age well in hip-hop.
Yeah. He has been, and he's such a GOAT. People got all this judgment and they don't understand. People should just give him his time. He's going to be back. That feeling finds you—you can't run from it. He not running, he just saying he not going to force it. What you love about him was when he was compelled. It'll be back. And when it does, he's going to come in hot.

When you're making music, do you ever catch yourself reaching for something you're hearing from the youth? Do you ever find yourself reaching for a trend?
No, I don't reach for no trend and I ain't reaching for nothing that I used to do. The trend was doing documentaries. I said no.

What do you mean?
Well, I mean [with *Piece by Piece,* the Lego animated biopic that came out in October], six, seven years ago, my very persistent agent kept asking [about doing a documentary]. I was like, "No, I don't give a fuck who's doing it, man. We already got *them*—they doing it." I don't want to do what everybody else is doing, bro. You know me. If everybody is stuck in traffic, I want to take the plane.

It's been cool to see you at so many fashion shows. Why have you been going to other designers' shows and what have you learned?
Well, I'm always going to go to a Comme [des Garçons] show. I'm a Comme child. Rei Kawakubo is something else. I went to a Sacai show recently, too. I love Chitose [Abe]. And I'm a huge fan of Jonathan Anderson.

What catches you about his work?
I think Jonathan Anderson is—I won't even call him underrated, because I think people do know.

Yeah, they caught on.
Jonathan believes in getting to the point. He makes his statement very simple. To me, on the other end of the spectrum is Rei, who is very simple about her ideas, but she's complex in her design. And then, obviously Kim [Jones] is a friend too. Kim was the first one to open up his doors to me when I left Chanel.

Open up his doors how? Saying "Let's do something together"?
Yeah: Let's do whatever. He was giving me carte blanche, and I'll never forget that. It never materialized because I ended up going to Vuitton.

You likewise opened up the doors of LV to Tyler, the Creator for a collaboration this year. What was the best moment of working together?
Me calling him to tell him. He's 30-something now and rarely gets the opportunity to be a kid again. He's lived so much life in the last 10 years—the growing pains of becoming a world-renowned artist. So that was my favorite moment: "Wait, who, me? Seriously? Whoa." He crushed it. I really just stood to the side and let him rock.

So recently I was having a—let's call it a "fashion conversation," and this person was like, "I think Pharrell will leave Vuitton soon. I'm sure he feels like he's done it now. He's checked the box, and soon he'll be ready to move on."
Wow. Did they just hit a joint when they said that?

Unclear.
They might've just taken a sip of something. You know what I mean? Because that's a high thought.

Any truth to it? You've done it, and you're ready to move on?
I don't think I've done it yet. This feels like *doing it,* this doesn't feel like *done it.* We're unlocking so many things. Reimagining the system—I'm all about system, strategy, and structure. And I think when you get all three of those humming, then you get to a place of simplicity. I love to work in silence. We don't really give you the progress reports, we just hit you with the blams. ⁘

WILL WELCH *is* GQ*'s global editorial director.*

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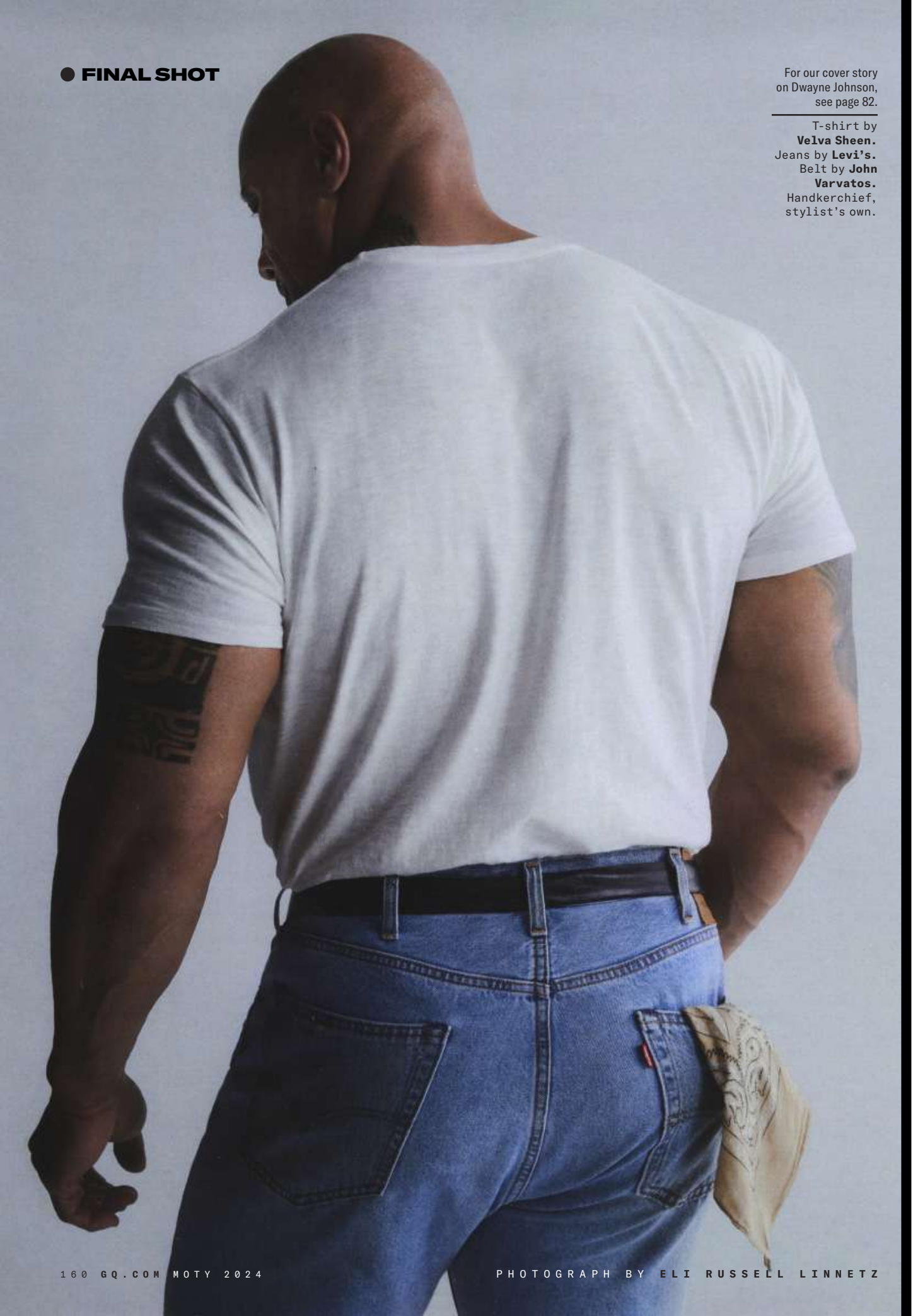
For our cover story on Dwayne Johnson, see page 82.

T-shirt by **Velva Sheen.** Jeans by **Levi's.** Belt by **John Varvatos.** Handkerchief, stylist's own.



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